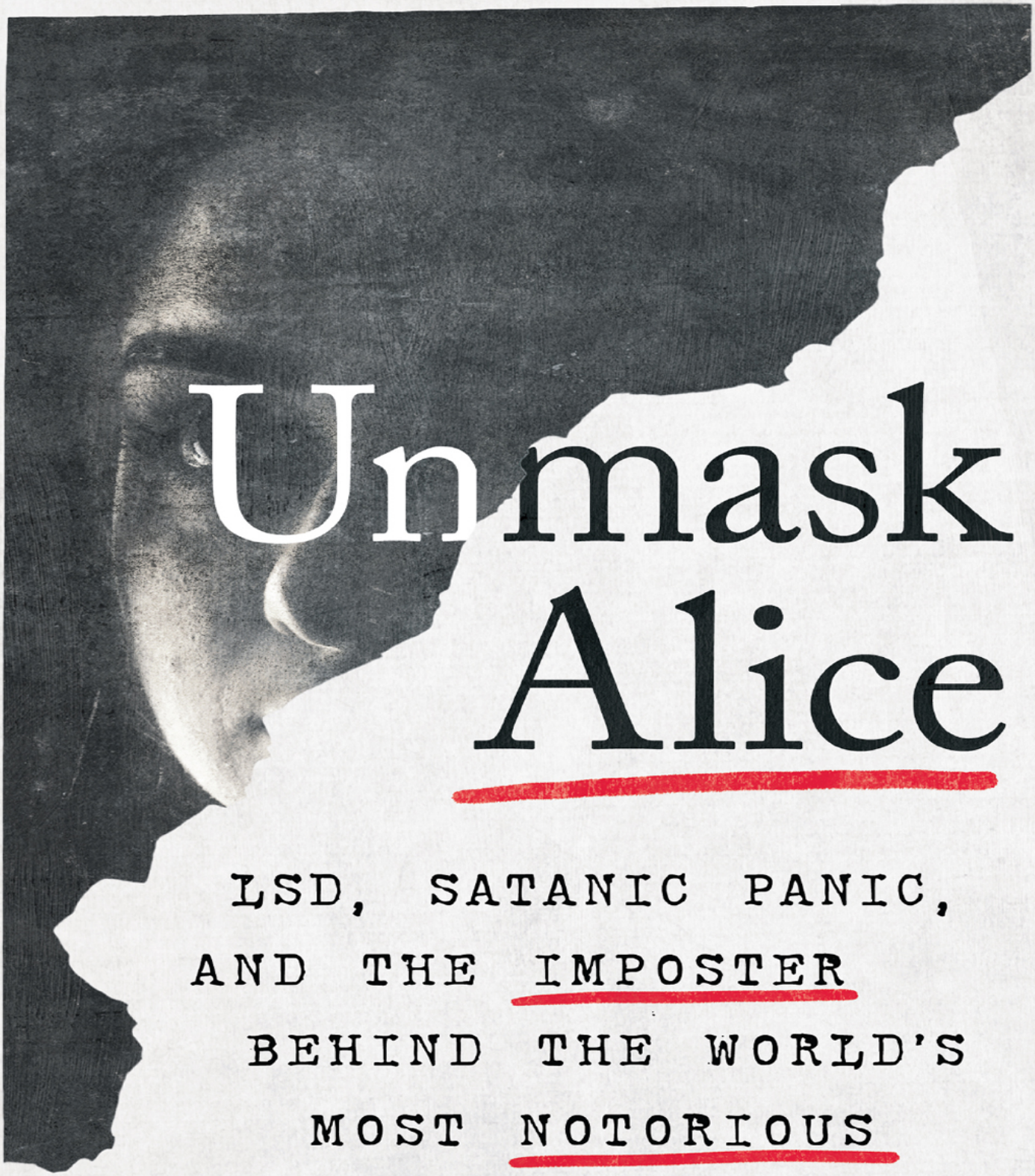

Unmask Alice

LSD, SATANIC PANIC, AND THE IMPOSTER BEHIND THE WORLD'S MOST NOTORIOUS DIARIES

Rick Emerson

Praise for *Unmask Alice*

"Deeply reported, deftly written, and laced with real moral outrage, Rick Emerson's *Unmask Alice* shines withering light on some of America's most treasured, yet nonsensical crusades. Starting with the story of *Go Ask Alice*, Emerson connects the War on Drugs to the Satanic Panic and reveals the real motivation of their most fervent crusaders: money and power."

—**Peter Ames Carlin,** *New York Times* bestselling author of *Bruce* and *Sonic Boom: The Impossible Rise of Warner Bros Records*.

"*Unmask Alice* is captivating . . . and reads like a mystery novel. It keeps you thinking about what has (and hasn't) changed in the last fifty years."

—**Heather Mayer,** historian, author of *Beyond the Rebel Girl*

"*Unmask Alice* is an eye-opening, shocking, and at times harrowing tale of deception, delusion, and exploitation. Veering from entertaining to stomach-turning to jaw-dropping, *Unmask Alice* is a must-read for any child of the 70s, 80s, or 90s. The truth will set you free, and will keep you turning the pages late into the night. If you've read *Go Ask Alice*, you have to read *Unmask Alice*."

—**Dan Gemeinhart,** award-winning author of *The Remarkable Journey of Coyote Sunrise* and *The Midnight Children*

"Rick Emerson's fascinating book, *Unmask Alice*, reveals the unsavory truth about Beatrice Sparks and her influential publications, *Go Ask Alice* and *Jay's Journal*. Emerson skillfully and credibly links Sparks's stubborn ambition to become recognized as an author to the destruction of lives and a period of Satanic worship hysteria."

—**Jana Brubaker,** author of *Text, Lies and Cataloging*

Unmask Alice

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LSD, SATANIC PANIC,

AND THE IMPOSTER

BEHIND THE WORLD'S

MOST NOTORIOUS DIARIES

Rick Emerson

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For my sister, who taught me to read.

And for my mom, who taught me the rest.

Contents

Author's Note, Part One

PROLOGUE: The Pretender

PART ONE: About a Girl

PART TWO: The Boy Who Died

PART THREE: Gods and Monsters

PART FOUR: Contagion

PART FIVE: Shine a Light

EPILOGUE: After Forever

Author's Note, Part Two

Appendix

Acknowledgments

Photo Credits

The living, if falsely defamed, have recourse to the laws of defamation. But the dead, if falsely maligned, have no recourse among the living through those laws.

—American Law Institute, Restatement (Second) of Torts § 560 (1977)

Truth has to change hands only a few times to become fiction.

—Pleasant Grove High School yearbook (1971), page 43

Author's Note, Part One

There are two kinds of people in this world: people who skip ahead to see how it all turns out—and people who take the ride, trusting that everything (or most things) will eventually be explained.*

I understand the "jump to the end" compulsion, especially when so many books, podcasts, documentaries, and other deep dives promise to finally reveal The Whole! Shocking! Truth! . . . then sputter their way to a noncommittal shrug.

Arggh, the consumer seethes. *I just wasted nine hours of my life to learn that the jury's still out on Bigfoot.*† Get burned often enough and the urge to fast-forward can feel overwhelming.

There's another reason people skip ahead (or to the comments), and that's sourcing. At some point, even the most credulous reader can wonder, *How does he know the car smelled vaguely of almonds?* Or, *How can he possibly say what the river looked like on January 3, 1970?* At such moments, it's tempting to rush to the internet, where someone is always waiting to answer your questions.

I won't order you to stay offline until you finish this book, and I won't begrudge the occasional doubt. (As you'll soon see, blind faith—in anything—is a bad idea.) That said, if you buckle in and let the story take the wheel, I think you'll be glad you did. When it's all over, I'll explain the sourcing, the background, the improbable details—everything.

Until then, a few quick notes:

- This is a true story. In a book of any length, errors are almost unavoidable, but to the best of my knowledge and ability, what follows is both accurate and morally honest. Any factual mistakes, even if they came from someone else, are ultimately my responsibility.
- No dialogue is invented. If it's in quotes, someone said it.
- Inner monologues and paraphrased statements are italicized and come from diaries, written records, interviews, and other concrete research.
- Journal entries, news blurbs, and the like are edited for clarity and brevity (i.e., to keep this book a manageable length), but I've preserved their meaning and intent.

That's it for now. See you on the other side.
—Rick Emerson

---

* In the twenty-first century, "skip ahead" takes many forms, including "skim Wikipedia during breakfast" and "trust the headline on BuzzFeed."

† Or in my case, D. B. Cooper. You'd think I'd eventually stop falling for the "have authorities finally found their man?" gambit, but no. I bite, every single time.

PROLOGUE

The Pretender

Wednesday, November 6, 1996

The grand ballroom of the Waldorf Astoria smells like perfume and coffee, and everyone is applauding.

At center stage, Toni Morrison receives a large bronze medal on a bright blue ribbon. Like the evening's other winners, Morrison will also get ten thousand dollars and (fingers crossed) a sales bump.

It's a perfect finale for the Forty-Sixth National Book Awards, the embodiment of their mission to "celebrate the best of American literature."

"I want to tell two little stories," Morrison says as the clapping fades. "The first, I heard third- or fourth-hand . . ."

As Morrison speaks, a green-eyed woman at table thirty-seven listens politely. Like Morrison, she's an author, but she's also one of five *judges* in a brand-new category: Young People's Literature. That award already happened, so now she just sits, waiting for things to wrap up.

For the woman at table thirty-seven, grousing would be easy. She's sold more books than Toni Morrison. In fact, she's sold more books than all of the winners *combined*. Her second book is still moving a thousand copies a week—more than four million so far. Not bad, considering it came out twenty-five years ago.

But no one asked *her* to speak tonight.

That’s how it’s always been. Ignored. Pushed aside. Deleted. Her biggest hit doesn’t even have her name on it, for Pete’s sake.

The agent’s fault. Why did I listen to him?

No matter. Tonight is a victory, the payoff for decades of hustling.

Later, at the afterparty, she’ll need to be careful. Nothing about her college degrees, or her fascinating career as an adolescent psychologist. (*Or was it psychotherapist? So hard to keep track.*)

And no mention of the dead boy. Not in this crowd.

She knows how much damage a writer can do.

Part One

About a Girl

She’s Leaving Home

June 1971

In the sixth-floor city room of the *Miami News*, Nicolette Handros stared at the little yellow paperback. It was an ARC, or “advance review copy,” which meant it was bare bones. No artwork, no dust jacket, no price tag. Just a bright yellow cover with five red words:

Go Ask Alice
Author anonymous

Below this, a typed 3" × 5" card was glued to the front:

> This special pre-publication paperback book that you hold in your hands is, in our estimation, one of the most gripping, terrifying and socially important books that we at Prentice-Hall have ever published.
>
> We feel confident that you will share our enthusiasm and our dedication to bring the published edition to the attention of every parent and young person in your community.

Handros hadn’t asked for this book—it had just *arrived*, landing at the newspaper with a pile of other promo titles, all of them angling for a little

exposure.

Handros was a staff reporter, and her usual beats were drugs and mental health (unofficially, “misfits and crazies”), but the *Miami News* was a second-place paper, so everyone did extra work. When a book caught your eye, you wrote a review, and it usually ran the same week.

Handros flipped through the paperback, checking the length. It was brief, with spacious text, a book you could read in one evening. It began with an editor’s note:

> *Go Ask Alice* is based on the actual diary of a fifteen-year-old drug user. It is not a definitive statement on the middle-class, teenage drug world. It does not offer any solutions.
>
> It is, however, a highly personal and specific chronicle. As such, we hope it will provide insights into the increasingly complicated world in which we live.
>
> Names, dates, places and certain events have been changed in accordance with the wishes of those concerned.

The next 159 pages were a slideshow of personal destruction. Lured into drug use by unsavory friends, a bright, middle-class teenager succumbs to addiction and impulse. She runs away from home but finds only heartache: a wasteland of pushers and prey. As things unravel, the diarist suffers a horrifying breakdown and lands in a psychiatric ward. She vows to start over, but the darkness soon returns; she dies at seventeen, leaving only the diary behind.

Reading *Go Ask Alice*, Nicolette Handros grew uncomfortable, like she was peering through somebody’s window. The writing was clunky and unguarded, the kind of thing meant to stay private.

This has to be real, she thought.

Handros knew about reality, especially its uglier forms. In the past twelve months, Dade County’s crime rate had spiked, and things were getting scary. Everyone seemed to be high, or packing heat, or both. That included children: expulsions were up by 60 percent, and it wasn’t making a dent. Across Miami, kids slashed each other with razors, assaulted teachers, and waved handguns in school hallways.

It wasn't just Florida. For a decade, the nation had slid toward the brink, pulled back, and slid again. JFK and MLK . . . then RFK. The Manson killings. The Manson trial. Kent State. Then the Pentagon Papers: a massive leak showing that the Vietnam War was unwinnable, and that the government had known it for years.

Things felt dangerous, like an ongoing earthquake. By mid-1971, homegrown bombings were hitting America *five times a day*, tearing through banks, police stations, and the US Capitol.

Even criminals who were caught couldn't be controlled. In Attica, New York, more than a thousand prisoners rioted, taking four-dozen hostages. When police finally stormed the gates, thirty-three inmates and ten hostages were killed—all but one by the cops themselves.

It was overwhelming. You couldn't *begin* to process a thousand bombings, or a thousand angry prisoners, or—God help you—seven thousand pages showing that the war was a pointless death trip.

But the story of one sad girl? That could break the hardest heart.

Handros fed a sheet of paper into her typewriter and thought about the diary.

"Alice," she typed, "could be anyone's daughter."

• • •

In Cincinnati, columnist Terri Loebker read *Alice*'s shocking conclusion and felt a sudden, empty ache.

I wish I had known her, Loebker thought. *Maybe I could have helped her.*

Loebker was a high school senior, and a year earlier, she'd joined the *Cincinnati Enquirer* as a teen correspondent, writing for the weekend edition. It paid almost nothing, but for Loebker, it was a chance to report on a culture in flux. The sixties had torn the nation in two, and Ohio, where National Guardsmen had shot thirteen Kent State students in 1970, still felt divided.

Loebker didn't drink or get high, but she viewed herself as a hippie, and she grieved for the diary's anonymous author.

In her October 16 column, Loebker urged every reader to buy two copies of *Go Ask Alice*: one for themselves and one for a friend.

"*Go Ask Alice*," wrote Loebker, "is the deepest insight into drug use ever printed, [and] is recommended reading for both sides of the generation gap."

• • •

For parents especially, that gap had become a canyon. Even obedient children seemed like potential time bombs, and parents braced for the day when things might blow apart.

Instead, more and more teenagers simply disappeared.

Runaways had always existed, but they'd come from predictable places, for predictable reasons. Some were true delinquents: knife-pullers and window-smashers who'd been cutting out since grade school. Some were banished reminders of long-gone wives or husbands. Others were more like refugees—exiled for being pregnant, or being gay, or finally telling a handsy stepfather to *knock it off*.

Ugly and sad, yes, but also understandable. Sometimes, running was the only real choice.

Then something changed. In 1964, more than two hundred thousand teenagers vanished long enough to be declared missing. The following year, it was close to five hundred thousand, and confusion turned to panic.

It wasn't just the numbers that had people rattled, it was the teenagers themselves. They weren't backwater fuckups or terminal crackpots, but honor students and athletes, and they were overwhelmingly female. By 1971, the average American runaway was a white, middle-class, suburban girl who was barely fifteen.

In Boston and New Orleans, they drifted in by the hundreds. In Greenwich Village, cops put the number at twelve hundred a month. And in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district, more than twenty thousand teenagers arrived each year—a virtual army of sad-eyed dreamers.

Most gave up and went home, embarrassed and defeated. The ones who stayed learned how to hustle, and even then, it was hard. Dealers and pimps

descended like bats, drinking and draining, then flying away.

When parents described a missing child, the police gave concrete advice. *Whatever your daughter weighs, subtract twenty pounds. No one stays healthy out there.*

Some disappeared for a weekend, some for several months, and a handful never came back. Most returned within a few weeks, but that was long enough to cause damage—to their parents, to themselves, to anyone who cared.

• • •

In Jackson, Tennessee, twenty-four-year-old reporter Delores Ballard started reading *Go Ask Alice*—and couldn't stop.

This could be me, she thought. *The teenage me, anyway.*

It wasn't the drugs—Ballard had always been straitlaced. It was the madness. The terrible (and glorious) roar of emotions that defined adolescence.

Ballard thought back to her own teenage years, to her own diary. She had felt like one giant nerve ending, and her writing had shown it, all *Sturm* and *Drang* and fury and light. Embarrassing in retrospect, but also honest. Maybe embarrassing *because* it was honest. Teenagers didn't filter; that was their blessing and curse.

"Alice" (whoever she was) had captured that feeling in language any young woman could recognize, and the resonance made her death even more crushing.

"Alice didn't know she was writing a book," said Ballard's September 5, 1971, review in the *Jackson Sun*. "She was just one of a million 15-year-old girls who kept a diary; a real, honest-to-goodness teenage diary.

"This book is the most personal, most revealing, and most agonizingly tragic chronicle of drug addiction that has ever appeared in print.

"*Go Ask Alice* belongs on every school library shelf; it belongs in the hands of every parent of a teenager, and every teenager who is ever tempted to even try the drug route."

• • •

To millions of parents, “the drug route” converged with other, darker paths—low roads that snaked through the heartland, leading young people to corruption and ruin. Those byways were stalked by a shape-shifting monster, a creature that lurked on bright strips of paper or inside pieces of candy. It was odorless and flavorless, and weighed almost nothing, and they said it would eat you alive. It was a chemical demon unleashed by mistake.

Into the Great Wide Open

Friday, April 16, 1943

The laboratory looked more like a country kitchen. Lots of white cabinets and drawers, each with a small black handle. There were low wooden chairs and screenless windows that swung wide open. Rows of corked bottles lined every shelf.

A slender, spectacled man moved here and there, adding, mixing, observing. His head was small and perfectly round, with a layer of short, dark hair. His crisp white lab coat was cinched at the waist. Order and control.

Swiss chemist Albert Hofmann wasn't trying to innovate. Just the opposite: there was big money in asthma treatments, and Hofmann's employer, Sandoz Labs, wanted a piece of it. Could Hofmann clone a competitor's drug? Hofmann thought so, and was synthesizing a plant extract that might do the trick.

Then, without warning, he began to drift. His movements felt sluggish, but his mind was scattered—definitely not suitable for lab work. Hofmann decided to call it a day.

With World War II still roaring, fuel was scarce in Switzerland, so Hofmann biked to work each morning—a six-mile path of smooth, easy ground. Now, pedaling toward home, Hofmann struggled to stay upright. He felt drunk, or something like it.

For the next two hours, he saw a stream of dazzling, wildly colored figments. They moved and merged without friction, collapsing and growing like liquid flowers.

The next morning, he felt normal again: no visions, no sickness. Cycling to work, he thought back on the previous day. Had some of the extract gotten on his fingertips? He was always so careful, but what else could it be?

Hofmann was a scientist, and he couldn't leave nagging questions unanswered. He had to know.

Monday, April 19, 1943

Hofmann double-checked everything. In front of him sat a fresh fountain pen, a lab journal, and a teaspoon of lysergic acid diethylamide-25. He mixed the chemical into some water, swallowed it, and looked at the clock. It was 4:20 PM.*

He reached for his journal and made a quick note:

> Self-Experiment: Diethylamide tartrate (0.5cc) taken diluted with about 10cc water. Tasteless.

At 5:00 PM, he made another entry:

> Beginning dizziness, anxiety, disturbed vision, paralysis, urge to laugh—

That was as far as he got. He stared at the page, but couldn't continue. Dr. Albert Hofmann, age thirty-seven, had forgotten how to write.

5:15 PM

Hofmann’s mind was coming apart, and his body wasn’t doing much better. His muscles felt spastic—yet frozen—and his equilibrium was awhirl.

Amid this chaos, however, another part of Hofmann’s mind was actually *relaxing*, stretching out like a prisoner sprung from solitary. This part decided to bicycle home again.

Why not? It’s such a beautiful day.

Hofmann asked his lab assistant, Susi Ramstein, to help him get home safely, and Ramstein, who had no idea what was happening, agreed. Soon, the scientists were on their bicycles, pedaling toward nearby Binningen.

For Hofmann, it was half fascination, half terror, everything distorted and glinting. People warped into geometric shapes; houses loomed like menacing giants. And something was happening with *time*. Hofmann thought he was traveling slowly; in reality, he was cycling at top speed, and Ramstein struggled to keep up.

After arriving home, Hofmann collapsed on a sofa and attempted to get his bearings. It was difficult, especially with the furniture moving and the walls pulsing, the whole place like a giant, room-shaped stomach.

He tried to explain things to Ramstein, but it was hopeless. At that moment, Albert Hofmann was the first person—*ever*—to have taken LSD, and there was no context. He was dreaming with his eyes wide open, and logic was slippery, elusive. Ideas appeared, then vanished, a flutter of wings and ribbons.

Hofmann, whose wife and children were away visiting family, worried that he’d poisoned himself. He asked Ramstein to get the family doctor and to find a bottle of milk.

Maybe I can dilute the poison . . . buy myself a little time.

After what felt like days, the doctor arrived. With no understanding of LSD, and with Hofmann making little sense, he checked the basics: blood pressure, breathing, pupils, pulse.

Hofmann’s pupils were the size of dimes, but everything else was normal. The doctor spoke slowly and clearly. *There is no sign of poison, and no sign of illness.*

At this, Hofmann’s panic receded, replaced by feelings of gratitude and good fortune. Everything would be fine.

The doctor moved Hofmann into the bedroom, monitored his condition for a while, then departed.

Hofmann, meanwhile, plunged into a shimmering, spiraling dreamscape, a place both vast and exquisitely personal. Fountains of color bloomed, then flowed together, morphing and sparkling. Even more amazing were the sounds: Hofmann could *see* them. Somewhere outside the bedroom, a door went *thunk*, and Hofmann's mind surged with new colors. A car passed the house, and pleasing shapes bubbled to life, then floated away.

The next morning, Hofmann felt reborn. His muscles ached, and he was physically drained, but his mind was alive and whirring. Everything was brighter and cleaner. His breakfast was *extraordinary*. When he stepped outside, the garden glowed with sunlight.

"The world," Hofmann later wrote, "felt newly created."

• • •

Hofmann gave his managers a detailed report, and what floored them was the dosage. He'd taken just 250 micrograms of LSD—less than the weight of a single grain of sugar. LSD was a hundred times stronger than psilocybin, the key ingredient in "magic" mushrooms, and *three thousand times* stronger than mescaline, the key ingredient in peyote. What's more, there appeared to be no hangover. The drug took charge, ran its course, and left you happier than before. Like yourself . . . but better.

It seemed too good to be true. Hofmann's bosses scaled back the dosage even further, from 250 micrograms down to 85, and gave it a try.

Forty minutes later, everyone saw the light.

• • •

Clinical trials only burnished LSD's halo. In minuscule doses, it unlocked emotions, enhancing the effects of psychoanalysis. In larger doses, it became the Holy Grail, relieving physical pain—even in cancer patients—without addiction.

In 1947, Sandoz patented LSD and pitched it as a research aid, a way to explore (and restore) the human mind.

Around the world, doctors and psychologists received small orange bottles of LSD tablets, sometimes by the dozen. In exchange, Sandoz asked for updates on how the drug was used, and where it showed the most potential.

Offered free samples of a breakthrough medicine, many doctors did the obvious: they opened the bottle, popped a little round pill (or two), and spent the next eight hours in ecstasy. Or abject terror. It all depended.

Context, doctors soon discovered, was everything. LSD took its cues from your mood and surroundings. In the right frame of mind, in a tranquil place, you could untangle your own neuroses, emerging buoyant and refreshed. In the *wrong* setting, or without someone to guide you, panic attacks and morbid visions could scour your senses for hours on end.

Doctors and therapists learned to start small, using tiny amounts and working up from there. Soon, they glimpsed the future, a place where even the deepest suffering might be cured. Not smothered or stifled, but actually *stopped*. At its best, LSD eased traumatic stress, allowing soldiers, rape victims, and even Auschwitz survivors to process—then shed—their lingering torment. For patients with terminal cancer, LSD not only muted the pain, but aided in acceptance, smoothing the passage through life's final chapter.

In Britain, doctors used LSD to treat "hopeless" alcoholics: men and women who had failed to beat the bottle with willpower, religion, and support groups. One year later, nearly half were still sober, the highest success rate of any known treatment.

• • •

There were abuses, accidental and otherwise. In 1953, the CIA launched MK-ULTRA, a cluster of brainwashing experiments modeled on Nazi research. For more than a decade, government agents dosed thousands of unsuspecting Americans—including prisoners, students, and children—with LSD, often in massive amounts.

In New York, the CIA went the extra mile, launching its own *brothel*, complete with heroin-addicted prostitutes. In exchange for dosing johns with LSD (usually via tainted booze), the women got their daily fix, immunity from arrest, and a hundred bucks a night. The agents, in turn, got to watch through one-way mirrors as the hapless men went bonkers. They called it “Operation: Midnight Climax.”

• • •

Through it all, LSD kept a low public profile. It was hard to find, hard to describe, and used mainly in research. It was also relatively safe. Nothing sexy about that.

Then, in 1963, Sandoz’s patent expired. Suddenly, anyone could manufacture LSD. You didn’t need permission, only the formula, and it was still completely legal. In college towns across the land, basement chemists did the rest, spreading the word to friends and lovers.

As acid’s popularity increased, straight society grew anxious, and newspapers fed the fear with Grand Guignol headlines: “Musician Gouges Own Eyes” (Canada’s *Globe and Mail*); “6 College Men Take LSD, Blinded by Sun” (*Los Angeles Times*); “LSD Man Committed in Slaying of Mother-in-Law” (*New York Daily News*).

They were nightmarish stories, but they also felt distant. Nobody cared about artists and idiots, or grown men with mommy issues.

To make people care, you had to get personal. The victims had to *matter*.

---

* Yes, really.

Black and White and Read All Over

Sunday, October 8, 1967

It was just before 8:00 AM when Freddie Wright, a chubby-faced Black man with a broad mustache and deeply tired eyes, saw the bodies.

Wright was the janitor at 169 Avenue B, a five-story tenement in New York's tattered East Village, and instead of money, he got to crash in the boiler room, a concrete box that felt like a dumpster and smelled like rats.

He'd been out all night, looking good in a charcoal jacket and pressed white shirt, but now he needed to sleep. Pushing open the basement door, Wright reached for the light.

After a moment of blindness, he saw them, crumpled and bloody on the cement floor. A man and a woman, both fairly young. The woman was pale white. Beyond that, he couldn't say—they were beaten to mush.

This was bad. Bad in the worst possible way. The door was flimsy, and Wright wasn't the only one with a key, but he *lived* here. They would string him up for sure.

Wright left and locked the door behind him, then went to see a girlfriend, who agreed that it was grim, but said he should call the cops anyway. They might not believe him, but if he didn't tell the police, then what? She wasn't helping Wright hide any bodies, so his options were limited.

Back at the tenement, Wright phoned the 9th Precinct police station, a six-story fortress on the other side of Tompkins Square Park. The men who worked there called it “the Fighting 9th,” but everyone else—even other cops—called it “the Shithouse.”

When the desk officer answered, Wright explained things, knowing how it sounded. The cop told him to stay where he was; someone would be right over.

Fifteen minutes later, detectives arrived, and Wright took them downstairs. There, near a wet mattress and a plywood closet, police saw the bodies, stripped bare and splayed on the concrete, their faces caved in like old candles. Nearby, a brick was matted with hair and blood.

The dead man was James Hutchinson, aka “Groovy,” a twenty-one-year-old drifter from a crumbling Rhode Island mill town. In his wallet was a photo of the father he’d never met.

The dead woman was a different story, and when police learned *her* name, everything changed.

• • •

Linda Fitzpatrick was eighteen, dark blond, and filthy rich. Back in Connecticut, she’d lived in a thirty-room house and gone to private schools. She’d been a gifted athlete, bringing home awards in swimming and dressage. Now she was dead and cold on a tenement floor.

The story flooded New York and then the whole country. Newspapers showed Linda’s yearbook photo, the flip hairdo and the bland smile. They showed her family’s cut-stone mansion, and the trash-strewn boiler room where she’d died.

Before long, a story took shape. Six months earlier, while on vacation in Bermuda, Linda Fitzpatrick had taken LSD for the first time. After that, said her parents, she was different; she spent all her free time in New York, hanging out with “artists” and footing the bill for drug trips. Finally, she’d quit high school and ditched her old life. She moved to the Village and slept wherever she could, trading whatever she had.

Then she met Groovy Hutchinson (nobody called him James), who looked like a model and talked like a poet. He had dark, liquid eyes, high cheekbones, and his mother's olive complexion, all of it framed by a halo of wavy, coal-black hair. Groovy and Linda clicked, and were soon inseparable—hustling, dreaming, and staying as high as possible.

On October 7, the couple tried to score in Tompkins Square. A dealer sent them down the street and into a five-story building. *My man inside will take care of you.*

Two hours later, Linda and Groovy were dead. He'd been stripped naked, bludgeoned with a brick, then tossed aside. Linda had been stripped, beaten, raped, then killed with the very same brick. The bodies lay there until daybreak, when Freddie Wright, drained from a long Saturday night, gathered his courage and called the police.

• • •

At the 9th Precinct station, detectives kept asking Wright about a guy who lived in his building: a Black Power type they suspected in the killings. When Wright didn't take the hint, they circled back, prodding and prompting, and kept him awake for another eighteen hours. Then they charged Wright with a different rape in the same building.

Of course, said detectives, *if you help us with this other thing, we could maybe make that go away.*

• • •

Arrests came on Monday, October 9, 1967:

> 2 ACCUSED IN MURDER OF LSD HIPPIE COUPLE
>
> NEW YORK (AP)—Two men are accused in the LSD party murders of Linda Fitzpatrick, 18, and her long-haired boyfriend, James "Groovy" Hutchinson, 21.

> Police said it was a wild interracial LSD party that climaxed in the bludgeon slayings of the two young people.
>
> NEGRO HELD
>
> Police said the questioning of several persons present at the party led to the arrest of Donald Ramsey, 26, a bearded Negro laborer who was said to practice the African tribal faith Yoruba. Later, police also placed a charge against Thomas Dennis, 25, an unemployed Negro vagrant.
>
> "The couple were looking for LSD, and they were enticed into the basement, where they were given the drug," said police.

That last sentence was significant. After all, good girls didn't *take* LSD—they were *given* LSD.

In his long, rambling statement to the cops, "bearded Negro laborer" Donald Ramsey said he couldn't remember much. The LSD had scrambled his brain.

"It was just spots and colors and whirling things," Ramsey told police. "I was really flying."

And then some. By his own account, Ramsey had downed a bottle of blackberry wine, two large beers, a few shots of rum, and a half-pint of Thunderbird, all before taking the acid. Then, to perk himself up, he copped some cheap speed and leveled things out with additional booze. But none of that made the headlines. Instead, parents read, "Suspects Hunted in LSD Slaying," and "Two More Men Sought in LSD Death Spree." If they kept reading, they usually saw some blend of the following: "Black Power," "interracial," "sex party," and "wealthy teenaged girl."

In the end, Donald Ramsey got life. Thomas Dennis, the dealer who sent Linda and Groovy into the building, got fifteen years. Both men died in prison.

For his trouble, janitor Freddie Wright took a felony-assault charge and went directly to lockup to wait for a trial. Eighteen months later, with no trial in sight, Wright pleaded guilty to second-degree attempted rape. According to court records, Wright barely grasped the consequences of pleading, but took the deal because (a) his lawyer said it was the best

available, and (b) it got him temporarily released pending sentence, after which, he went to prison.

• • •

The stories all mentioned James “Groovy” Hutchinson, but mostly in passing. For one thing, he was a penniless, long-haired peace activist—no loss there. For another, he was suspiciously tan; what a later generation would invariably call “exotic.” In the sixties, people still said “ethnic” or “mixed,” but it all meant the same thing: *not white*. To much of America, that instantly made his death a footnote.

Linda Fitzpatrick, on the other hand . . . well, the name told you everything, didn’t it?

Even before the double slaying, the US government had toyed with banning LSD. Now, lawmakers had their mascot. In October 1968, one year after Linda Fitzpatrick’s death, possession of LSD in any amount, for any purpose, became a federal crime.

And still, the horrors kept coming.

I Put a Spell on You

Monday, July 27, 1970

Four young women sat inside the Los Angeles Hall of Justice, giggling and winking. Each had a large *X* carved into her forehead. A few feet away, the man they worshipped was on trial for seven counts of murder, and so were they.

But "murder" didn't quite cover it. Over two nights in August 1969, Charles Manson and his pack of feral runaways killed seven people, including actress Sharon Tate, who was eight months pregnant. They shot some of the victims and stabbed all of the others, going and going until the bodies resembled red sponges. They carved the word *WAR* into one man's stomach, and wrote on the walls with victims' blood: *Death to Pigs*, and *Healter* [sic] *Skelter.*[*]

California had a long history of bizarre and shocking crime: The Black Dahlia Murder, the fishy suicide of TV Superman George Reeves, and serial killings galore. Just a year before Manson's crime spree, a dazed lunatic named Sirhan Sirhan had murdered Robert Kennedy in the kitchen of the Ambassador Hotel.

But the Manson story felt different. It wasn't just the violence, or the stylized gore, or the seeming randomness. It wasn't even the group-kill mentality. Instead, it was who the killers *were*. Almost without exception, Manson's disciples were suburban white girls: former glee club members

and church-choir standouts. Manson's second-in-command, Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme, had once performed at the White House with a dance troupe called the Westchester Lariats.

As the case against Manson and several "Family" members progressed, his female followers kept a sidewalk vigil, grinning and dancing and scaring the shit out of everyone, especially those with daughters of their own.

Jesus, people thought. *What did he do to those girls?*

Soon, they had the answer. Manson, the prosecution and defense teams agreed, had used LSD as a psychic crowbar, prying open the women's minds and rebuilding them as monsters.

For parents already terrified of drugs, it was the starkest proof yet that LSD was simply evil. Beyond the ravages of alcohol or the muddy haze of marijuana, LSD struck at the American soul. It could change who you were. Forever.

• • •

Worst of all, you didn't have to go looking for LSD. It would find you. Everyone had heard the stories. Like the one about a "swinging singles party" in Marina del Rey, where seventeen people—or possibly fifty people, depending on the newspaper—had been dosed via tainted potato chips. Four months later, prosecutors charged a community activist (and longtime enemy of city hall) with lacing the snacks.

At trial, the case grew shaky; the state couldn't prove that anyone at the party had actually *taken* LSD, much less against their will. Prosecutors struck a plea bargain, and the story faded away.

By then, however, the idea had taken hold. LSD users weren't content to ruin their own lives: they wanted to ruin yours as well.

Alleged spikings quickly dotted the map. People in mid-hangover wondered if they'd been drugged the night before. It was a strangely comforting idea, especially when the alternative was admitting that you sometimes got blackout drunk.

Newspaper columns joined in, urging readers to watch their food, their drinks, their neighbors. Soon, everybody knew *somebody* who'd been dosed.

Most of the dosing, however, was on purpose. In 1970 alone, nearly one million Americans took acid for the first time—the most ever in a single year. The legal risks were minimal: Congress's LSD ban was a confusing, unworkable jumble.

That changed in October 1970 when Richard Nixon signed the Controlled Substances Act, merging countless federal laws into a single, thousand-ton hammer. In a stroke, LSD and marijuana became "Schedule I" drugs, no different than heroin. A first-time, nonviolent offender could draw a forty-year sentence, and that was for *possession.* If the DA could prove trafficking, then it was life.

Such Levitical zeal didn't motivate kids to talk about drugs with their parents, most of whom supported Nixon and his myriad crusades. So adults were shut out—left pressing their ears against a heavy generational door, desperate to know what their children were up to.

Then, on Tuesday, September 14, 1971, they found out.

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* Attention Manson completists and/or fetishists: I am aware that Charles Manson himself (seemingly) didn't wield any of the weapons or actively join in the killings. He did, however, order his followers to commit murder, and when they returned home drenched in blood, his response was to take them joyriding through Los Feliz looking for additional victims, which they soon found.

Dear Diary

It's my birthday. I'm 15. Nothing.

—September 20 entry, *Go Ask Alice*

At the outset, Alice seems to have it all. She's white, Christian, and middle class. She lives on a cozy, tree-lined street in a nameless American suburb. Her mother stays at home, and her father teaches at the local college.*

But adolescence hits hard. Pimples and red spots cover Alice's face, and her weight seems to change by the hour.

Inside, things are just as chaotic. Alice's emotions jerk back and forth, barely under control. One moment, she's bursting with sunlight; the next, she's filled with darkness.

Alice's parents do their best, but they don't understand. How could they? Things are so different from when they were her age.

Then it gets worse. Alice's father takes a new job, and the family moves to a different town. Alice was already struggling, but at least she had friends. Now she feels like a ghost.

In desperation, she turns to her diary, and it becomes her closest companion—the place she can share all the anguish and doubt.

> I'm not too sure I'm going to make it in a new town. I barely made it in our old town where I knew everybody and they knew me. I've never even allowed myself to think about it before, but I really haven't much to offer in a new situation. Oh dear God, help me adjust, help me be accepted, help me belong, don't let me be a social outcast and a drag on my family.

Then something amazing happens. Out for a walk, Alice runs into Jill, a popular girl about Alice's age . . . and Jill invites Alice to a party!

Alice thinks it might be a joke, a way to lure her out and then embarrass her, but it's not. At Jill's house, Alice meets a roomful of people her own age, and everyone seems to *like her*.

Of course, she still feels like a misfit around such pretty people, but eventually, her stomach settles, and she's actually having *fun*.

Somebody brings out snacks and sodas. A few shared grins cross the room.

"Button, button," says Jill, "who's got the button?"

Alice doesn't know what this means, but a few minutes later, things look different. The room has all this . . . *extra information*. She can take it apart, rearrange it, make it shift and glow. And she feels *wonderful*.

> Never had anything ever been so beautiful. For the first time that I could remember in my whole life, I was completely uninhibited.

Some of the drinks were laced with LSD, but Alice isn't angry. Far from it! She would *never* have tried LSD on her own, so it's clear that they did her a favor. At long last, Alice is connected to everything and everybody. She is finally complete.

She also realizes that she can never really trust her parents again. They've been lying to her about drugs—maybe *all* drugs. What else have they been lying about?

A few days later, Alice meets up with Bill, a boy from the party. He offers her some speed, the kind you inject. Alice says yes, and in a rush, she feels *perfect*.

Later, Bill wants to have sex, and they do. They're both high, and the experience is beyond heaven—beyond *anything*. Last month, Alice was a beige little virgin; now she's reborn in full color.

But as the glow recedes, Alice panics.

What if I'm pregnant?

Abortion is illegal, and God willing, it won't come to that. She'll just have to hope.

The days crawl by. Alice's eyes wear grooves in the calendar, the worry like boiling water inside her. *Please, God, please.*

In desperation, she steals a few sleeping pills from her grandfather. They calm her down and make the time go faster. When she finally gets her period, she wants to collapse and cry, and she knows something for certain: without those pills, she might have gone crazy.

That's the dirty secret. Drugs *work*. When life hurts, they stop the pain. Who could argue with that?

Alice drops her old, square friends, and joins up with a girl named Chris. Before long, they're dating a pair of college-aged dealers who keep them stoned and sated. Soon, Alice and Chris are pushing at high schools, and even at middle schools, all to keep their own supply coming.

When the girls find their boyfriends in bed together, they figure it out. *We're just scapegoats if there's ever a bust.*

> I wonder how many other dumb chicks he's got working for him? Oh, I'm so ashamed! I can't believe I've sold to eleven and twelve year olds and even nine and ten year olds. What a disgrace I am to myself and my family and to everybody.

Pissed off and wanting revenge, Alice and Chris call the cops, rat out the dealers, then decide to skip town. They head for San Francisco, where they vow to get clean.

Staying clean is the hard part, especially when surrounded by users. One evening, a decked-out socialite named Shelia invites the girls to a glitzy, full-tilt party, and the old habits come roaring back. Before long, Alice and Chris are strung out, and Shelia turns predator, helping her sleazy boyfriend rape the two girls.

Ashamed and frightened, Alice returns home, where her willpower fades. Soon, she's hitchhiking to Colorado, then Oregon, then California, where she loses herself in a chemical fog. The days are desperate, and the nights are worse. Nothing matters but the next fix: not the outdoor sleeping, not the street-corner begging, not the tricks she eventually turns.

Nearing rock bottom, Alice gathers the last of her strength and returns home, praying that her parents will take her back. When they do, the relief is overwhelming. *I am staying clean for the rest of my life*.

Her former drug pals don't agree. To them, cleaning up is selling out, and they strike back in the ugliest way, spiking some of Alice's snacks.

That night, while babysitting, Alice unwittingly eats the tainted food, and the drug surges through her, stronger than ever before. Her nervous system in flames, Alice has a massive, horrific breakdown, filled with images of death and decay. She grabs the phone to call for help, then sees her grandfather's corpse staggering toward her, his eye sockets writhing with worms. As she struggles to dial, his arms encircle her, the larvae swarming onto her body. Alice tries to escape, but the maggots are everywhere, covering every surface. Screaming for help, she's dragged toward a casket, where a thousand dead creatures force her inside. Looking straight up, choking and gagging, she claws at the lid as it closes forever.

• • •

Alice wakes up in a psych ward—a gallery of lost and damaged souls, each more pathetic than the last. At night, the hard-tile halls echo with choked, gurgling noises and unearthly wails. Worse, the images from her breakdown keep returning: flies and worms, buzzing and twisting. She sees them in the mirror and on her hands, and feels them in her vagina, chewing, destroying.

After several days, the visions fade, and Alice accepts a grim truth. It's not enough to just stay clean; she has to cut ties with her junkie "friends." If she doesn't, they'll pull her under.

Returning home weeks later, Alice takes stock. She has her family, her faith, and maybe, just maybe, a chance at love—normal, respectable love—

with an old boyfriend. She won't slip again, not *ever*. She has too much to lose.

She also decides to stop keeping a diary. With her new life beginning, it's time to quit living inside her own head.

The moment is bittersweet. For a long time, the diary was Alice's only true friend.

> You saved my sanity a hundred, thousand, million times . . . thank you.

After a few more sentences, Alice signs off with her trademark farewell:

> See ya.

Then, an epilogue:

> The subject of this book died three weeks after her decision not to keep another diary.
>
> Her parents came home from a movie and found her dead. They called the police and the hospital but there was nothing anyone could do.
>
> Was it an accidental overdose? A premeditated overdose? No one knows, and in some ways that question isn't important. What must be of concern is that she died, and that she was only one of thousands of drug deaths that year.

Even before its whiplash ending, *Alice* was brutal, shoving your face in shit. If you made it past the drugs and teenage hookers (and neglected toddlers and gang rapes), Alice's final meltdown was a long, shrieking nightmare:

> Gramps . . . tried to pick me up, but only the skeleton remained of his hands and arms. The rest had been picked clean by wriggling, writhing, slithering, busily eating worms which seethed on his every part. They were eating and they wouldn't stop.

> His two eye sockets were teeming with white soft-bodied, creeping animals which were burrowing in and out of his flesh and which were phosphorescent and swirled into one another.
>
> The worms and parasites started creeping and crawling and running toward the baby's room and I tried to stomp on them and beat them to death with my hands but they multiplied faster than I could kill them. And they began crawling on my own hands and arms and face and body.
>
> They were in my nose and my mouth and my throat, choking me, strangling me.

When a fly buzzes through her hospital room days later, Alice starts screaming, terrified that the creature will lay its eggs on her body.

Stumbling to a mirror, Alice sees a bruised, scratched face and patchy hair. *Maybe*, she thinks, *it isn't really me*.

This wasn't a Nancy Drew mystery or some haunted English castle. This was up close and intimate, a fear that burrowed inside you.

• • •

If you paid close attention, there were things that didn't make sense. Like the timeline: after her first LSD trip, Alice takes amphetamines, tranquilizers, pain pills, and even shoots up—and only *then* tries marijuana. And do mental wards really allow injured, delusional patients to keep a diary (much less a pen) within reach?

There were inconsistencies. If the book used pseudonyms ("Names, dates, places and certain events have been changed"), then why were some names blanked out? ("I met Fawn _____ at the store today.")

There was also pure nonsense. *Go Ask Alice* put every drug—LSD, marijuana, heroin, speed—into one lethal basket, with no attempt at nuance.

Few people noticed such hangnails. *Go Ask Alice* jerked and skipped like a rickety thrill ride, veering from one crisis to the next. There were no chapters, and no real breaks—just a chain of frazzled entries, often undated and barely coherent. The result was a kind of dazed momentum. Readers

plunged forward, unable to stop or get their bearings. Before they knew it, Alice was dead, and they were staring at a blank page, wondering how it all went wrong.

Early readers checked the inside flap, scanning (hoping?) for the words *fiction* or *novel*. But there was only that note from the editors, saying *Alice* was based on a real-life diary, the desperate cry of a burning angel.

The mystique got people talking, the talk got people buying, and the buzz began to feed on itself. Before long, demand was outstripping supply, and *Alice* was frequently sold out. Library wait lists stretched for weeks or months, and all of it generated more press.

In Illinois, a reviewer compared *Go Ask Alice* to Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*. In Ohio, a newspaper put *Alice* alongside *Eleanor & Franklin*, *The Young Elizabeth*, and other high-brow biographies. In Florida, the *Tallahassee Democrat* told readers, "No teenager or parent should miss *Go Ask Alice*, a documentary novel based upon the actual diary of a 15-year-old drug user."

What was a "documentary novel"? The paper didn't say, but "actual diary" and "true account" filled in the blanks.

There were skeptics. A few papers listed *Alice* as fiction, or with no description at all—just the title and publisher. But those were exceptions, and when the paperback arrived, it had a new, definitive subtitle:

Go Ask Alice
A Real Diary
by Anonymous

There was something else—something the book *didn't* say. Not on the front cover, or on the back, or anywhere in the fine print. It was buried in the government's massive *Catalog of Copyright Entries, Third Series, 1971: January–June*, page 1308:

Sparks, Beatrice M.
See GO ASK ALICE.

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* Contrary to popular belief, we never learn the diarist's name. (One passage suggests it might be "Carla.") Nonetheless, most readers refer to her as "Alice," so I'm doing the same.

A Life Left Behind

It should have been a moment of glory. After thirty years, Beatrice Sparks had conquered the world.

But nobody knew it.

It figured. Nothing had ever come easily for Beatrice. Not as a child, when she was born in the Idaho wilderness. Not as a teen, when her family imploded. Not on her own, when she'd labored for pennies. Not as a parent, when she'd buried her baby daughter.

Through it all, she'd kept on striving. Giving up? That was for other people. *Weak* people.

Now, at fifty-four, she'd finally broken through and was *still* getting the short end. "By Anonymous," indeed.

That's what I get for listening to my agent. He's probably stealing from me, to boot.

No matter. She'd keep on pushing. If you stopped for even a moment, the world would roll right over you.

Just keep moving.

Her mother had been the same way. In January 1917, Vivian Mathews had been on a train in southeast Idaho when her water broke. That was inconvenient, especially because she was already toting a pair of children.

Most people would have panicked, but Vivian just gathered her things, found a porter, and pointed at the two small kids.

Keep an eye on them until Lava Hot Springs.

It wasn't a request.

At the next stop, Vivian told her children to behave and said she'd rejoin them later. Then she picked up her suitcase and stepped off the train, which idled and hissed before churning away.

Vivian looked around. It wasn't even a town, just a mining camp—a bunch of tents and gruff, unhappy diggers. A strong wind would have carried off the whole place.

Vivian found a medic and skipped the formalities. *The baby's coming. I need to lie down.* The medic steered her to a nearby tent, and there, within sight of the railroad tracks, Vivian had a daughter, her second. She named the little girl Beatrice Ruby Mathews, wrapped her in a slip, walked back to the tracks, and caught the next train to Lava Hot Springs, where the other two children had, indeed, arrived safely.

• • •

That was the story Beatrice Sparks told everybody, and it was probably true. The lies didn't start until later, when her life went to hell and she decided to be someone else. Even then, she kept the train story intact; it made her seem heroic. *I was born in a tent in the middle of nowhere, and I succeeded. What's your excuse?*

For a dozen years, stability reigned. Beatrice and her family lived in Logan, Utah—a Mormon* flyspeck at the state's northern border. In Logan, the Church cast a literal shadow: the gold-topped temple was the town's highest point. No matter where you stood, it was right there, watching.

Beatrice's father, Leonard, was a house painter and craftsman, and his income brought a measure of comfort. The family owned a midsize home with a stand-alone garage; they also owned a radio, something half their neighbors couldn't afford.

Beatrice took violin lessons and performed at social events, including meetings of the Ladies Literary club. For her twelfth birthday, she and a dozen guests enjoyed a sleigh ride through snow-dazzled Logan, then returned to Beatrice's home for a rose-colored supper: pink tapers on the table, side dishes including pink sweet peas, and a centerpiece cake featuring twelve pink candles.

Eight months later, in September 1929, the Great Depression hit. Across the nation, banks folded, factories closed, and families lost their footing. Suddenly, no one needed their house remodeled, and Leonard's income dwindled, so he looked for odd jobs and took what was offered. Vivian had her hands full raising the kids, and besides, the Church didn't exactly *encourage* women to work outside the home.

Still, they might have made it through . . . if Leonard had stuck around.

He'd been seeing a woman on the sly, a brunette half his age from neighboring Richmond. As things at home grew more precarious, the lure of starting over grew stronger, and when Beatrice was around fifteen, Leonard walked out, leaving his wife and children to fend for themselves.

At the time, the national divorce rate was less than 2 percent. In Logan, the divorce rate was zero. *Scandal* didn't do it justice, especially given the facts. Leonard had, after all, dumped his wife and kids for a woman young enough to be his daughter. Yet much of the gossip centered on Vivian. What had she done to make Leonard stray? A good man doesn't wander unless he's given cause.

For mother and daughter alike, it was shame upon shame. In Mormon life, everything rests on the family. You get married. You stay married. You die married. Along the way, you have kids, and they walk the same path. To do otherwise is to contravene the Great Plan.

A home with no husband was in serious peril, and Vivian had to dig in. She took a job at a local restaurant and found herself waiting on friends and fellow Saints. The money wasn't nearly enough, so Beatrice dropped out of high school and got a job at the same restaurant.

The menial job, the tarnished family, the abandoned diploma—they would have been awful anywhere, but small towns are echo chambers, and after a while, your worst moments are all people hear, so Beatrice decided to leave. It would be one less mouth for her mother to feed, and it would be a chance to start over.

At seventeen, she headed west, toward a shimmering, violent city that would shape her life—and work—forever.

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* Officially "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," a bulky phrase I don't wish to type nine thousand times. In daily life—and despite the Church's best efforts—it typically gets shortened

to “LDS,” but given this book’s frequent mentions of “LSD” (the drug), that seems like asking for trouble and/or inadvertent hilarity. For clarity’s sake, I’m sticking to “Saints,” “Latter-day Saints,” “Mormons,” and other casual terms. No disrespect is intended.

Tougher Than the Rest

Logan to San Francisco was barely seven hundred miles, but the difference was galactic. In small-town Utah, nothing much happened—that was the point. In San Francisco, *everything* happened all at once, the culture splitting and mixing in a thousand different ways. The city was mostly white, but already trending toward a vivid mosaic. Thousands of families slept on the streets or in crime-ridden parks, yet bulldozers were leveling hundreds of buildings to make room for the Golden Gate Bridge. Prohibition lingered, but liquor was everywhere. Banks were booming, and so were bread lines.

In 1934, just as Beatrice arrived, the tension finally exploded. That summer, police fired into a crowd of picketing dockworkers, killing two men and wounding several more. In response, more than 130,000 workers walked off the job—the largest strike in US history to that point. The governor sent in the military, and overnight, San Francisco bristled with bayonets. Down on the docks, machine-gun nests ringed by sandbags protected the ships and their cargo. When a civilian tried to take photos, soldiers shot him.

Things eventually cooled, with concessions on both sides. Troops withdrew and strikers went back to work, but everyone stayed jumpy. If it happened once, it could happen again.

If all of that left you unrattled, there were the *literal* earthquakes: little rumbles here and there, making sure you never really exhaled.

For the teenaged Beatrice, this version of San Francisco—loud, malevolent, intoxicating—proved indelible. In the following decades, it would turn up again and again in her writing, the perfect canvas for adolescent frenzy.

• • •

By 1936, Beatrice was waiting tables in Santa Monica, where a full day's work paid only two dollars. A high school dropout with no real prospects, what she *did* have was stubborn resolve. Her broken family would not define her; she would not allow it. She would be judged by what she accomplished, not by her parents or past.

The week that Beatrice turned nineteen, she met someone else who felt the same way.

Across the street was a clothing store, and one of the salesmen came in for lunch. When he and Beatrice got to talking, the connection was undeniable.

Born to a Mormon family in central Texas, LaVorn Sparks had also lost his father—to tuberculosis. Like Beatrice, LaVorn had dropped out of school and gotten a job. He'd been eleven years old. If that seemed unfair, so be it. The Depression was on, and you worked or you starved.

Now he was grown and selling clothes in Santa Monica, with some occasional cleaning and tailoring. He didn't plan to stay there forever, but things were still shaky, and money was money.

As LaVorn and Beatrice talked during lunchtimes, they saw each other—and saw themselves reflected.

Six weeks later, they got married. It wasn't so much a wedding as a *procedure*, the kind with plastic flowers and a ready-made script. Even the denomination sounded bureaucratic: the United Christian Church of America.

The following year, Beatrice Sparks had her first child, a girl she named Jimmie LaVonette.

But Jimmie was premature and wouldn't—or couldn't—nurse.

In the early hours of Saturday, April 10, 1937, Jimmie LaVonette stopped breathing, went still, and died. She was six days old.

That horror had barely passed when Beatrice got another shock. Her younger siblings, Robert and Roma, were in an *orphanage*.

The story emerged in bits and pieces. Not long after Beatrice's own wedding, her mother, Vivian, got remarried, but kids didn't fit the plan. Just like that, Roma and Robert landed in a home for orphaned children. (Decades later, Roma was blunt: "They were going on their honeymoon and didn't know what to do with me.")

Beatrice and LaVorn intervened, essentially adopting Roma, who was seven. (Twelve-year-old Robert, meanwhile, went back to living with his father, who had married his crosstown girlfriend.)

• • •

It was a lot to carry, but the couple pushed forward, and in 1938, they had their second child, a daughter named Yvonne Suzette. Two years later, they welcomed a son, LaVorn Jr.

Including Roma, that made for a family of five, and money was stretched to the limit. But LaVorn had a keen eye for commerce, and when a military base opened in his hometown, he saw a potential windfall. *Who lives on a military base? Hundreds of soldiers. And what do they need each morning? Hundreds of crisp, clean uniforms.*

A few weeks later, the family moved to San Angelo, Texas, where Sparks Dry Cleaners soon cornered the military market.

While LaVorn ran the business, Beatrice raised the family. Ensconced in a home on Shiloh Street, she tended the house and took care of the children. She also found time to write, turning out poems and short stories, and starting a book on motherhood.

Then it all vanished.

I Wanna Be Somebody

Central Texas was prone to crippling, years-long droughts—parched and scalding epochs that shriveled crops, killed livestock, and turned whole rivers to dust. The scorching dryness also caused wildfires and made blazes of any kind harder to fight.

In 1943, flames roared through the Sparkses' home, reducing the structure to rubble and ash. The family escaped, and that was a blessing, but it didn't change the reality. They'd come to Texas with almost nothing, and now even that was gone.

In an echo of recent nightmares, the family was splintered, with at least one of the children (LaVorn Jr., who was three) sent to live with an aunt, while Beatrice and LaVorn rebuilt their lives . . . again.

This chain of disasters would have destroyed most people, but Beatrice and LaVorn endured. It was what they'd always done, even before they met. Now, as a couple, they wouldn't back down and wouldn't give in, and it would be that way to the end.

By 1944, they were in a new San Angelo home, smaller than before, but at least the family was back together. Even better, their luck was finally changing.

Everyone knew there was oil in the South, but nobody knew where or how much. Texas was the size of a planet, and drilling was expensive and dangerous; it meant going straight down for more than a mile, often through solid rock. It wasn't worth the time or investment, not unless you were sure.

Then oil hunters found the Permian Basin, a monster-size reserve lurking underneath central Texas. Three hundred miles long and nearly 250 miles wide, the Permian Basin held more oil than anyone had dared imagine. By 1944, it was yielding 82,000 barrels a day, most of it from only three cities: Midland, Odessa—and San Angelo.

LaVorn got in early, and the money finally flowed. Even better, oil was a front-loaded business, and most of the hard work came at the outset. If things went smoothly, it became like a dividend, mainly upkeep and regulation, and you could do that from anywhere.

Soon enough, the family escaped the vast, blinding desert and returned to Los Angeles. Using their newfound wealth, Beatrice and LaVorn bought, restored, then sold a series of houses before settling in Westwood Hills. Roma, whom Beatrice and LaVorn had raised to adulthood, graduated from high school, got married, and began her own life.

For the first time since she was twelve years old, Beatrice Sparks, now approaching thirty, had a calm and stable existence: husband, kids, financial security, and a home in perpetual sunshine. A lot of people might have slowed down, but Beatrice was focused as ever, and when she wasn't tending to house and family, she labored on a grand new project: reinvention.

She dreamed of being a psychologist and a published writer, but bouts of chaos had put her a decade behind. Psychology meant years of tedious study—another dozen at least. But writing took only willpower, and Beatrice Sparks had that in abundance.

She put down words by the tens of thousands, writing sample columns, children's stories, even little cartoons.

Next came the pitch, and that's where most writers failed. It could be stomach-boiling, approaching a total stranger with your work. *Hi. We've never met. Publish this.* It was harder still in California, where competition was fierce and even top-shelf writers heard *no* all the time. It was endless and grueling, designed to wear down all but the hungriest few. You had to *want* it, to crave validation more than you feared rejection. And you had to be shameless, selling yourself again and again until somebody finally said *yes*.

Of course, LaVorn's oil money helped. It meant that Beatrice could write for free, penning *gratis* columns for local newspapers, church

bulletins, and anyone else with pages to fill. And since no paper wanted to look like a shoestring operation, she wrote under multiple pen names, contributing several pieces per issue. She was “Bee Sparks,” and “Busy Bee,” and sometimes (merging her daughter’s and husband’s names) “Susan LaVorne.”

This sock-puppet staffing left some curious traces; things that wouldn’t stand out until many years later.

When Sparks began freelancing for the *California Intermountain News* in the late 1940s, the paper profiled her early achievements, including a few that hadn’t really happened:

> When she reached high school and college (University of Utah) she majored in Philosophy and Psychology. She was still writing poetry, and was considered talented and promising enough to appear in an Anthology of American poetry as “a promising and talented young American poetress.”

Sparks, the paper concluded, was an “unusually versatile and talented” writer.

They didn’t know the half of it. The article’s “facts” all came from a single source: the *Malibu Monitor*, another paper where Sparks wrote under various pen names.

The poetry claim was, to put it charitably, misleading. Two of Sparks’s poems, “Suzy” and “Sonny,” appeared in *Of America We Sing: A Patriotic Anthology of Poems and Lyrics*, published by Exposition Press.* Exposition was a vanity publisher, and made its money by selling page space to authors, often at outlandish prices. In other words, Sparks bought her way into the anthology *and* supplied her own bio, which began, “Beatrice Mathews Sparks attended Utah State Agriculture College.”

So here, in this single example, is *one* newspaper article (possibly written by Sparks), largely recycling an *earlier* article (probably written by Sparks), with both articles citing an anthology bio *definitely* written by Sparks. For added measure, she’s described as a student of two separate colleges, neither of which has any record of her enrollment.

It all went unnoticed, and understandably so. Nobody bought the *Intermountain News* for hard-hitting journalism, and who was going to push back about a college degree, much less an obscure poetry book?

As the clips piled up, Sparks reached out to agents and editors, angling for a breakthrough. At times, it could seem almost destined, especially when living a stone's throw from Hollywood, where dreams came true every day.

On occasion, she came close to stardom. Close enough to reach out—and feel it slip away.

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* In the latter poem, Sparks refers to her son as "an anchor on my joy."

Eraser

Joseph Barbera was restless and wanted a new challenge. Just thirty-six years old, Barbera had already won four Academy Awards for his work on *Tom & Jerry*, the warring cat-and-mouse duo he had created (with partner William Hanna) for MGM Studios.

Casting around for fresh territory, Barbera landed on comic books, which had exploded in popularity after World War II. Weren't comic books just story-boards, only folded and stapled? How hard could they be?

Through a small side company, Barbera prepped a half-dozen titles. Boys got cowboys, bandits, and wily animal sidekicks (*Red Rabbit*, *Panhandle Pete*). Girls got limp romance and gleaming teeth (*Junie Prom*, whose stem-thin title character was plagued by love-addled suitors).

Even formulaic dreck needed dialogue, so Barbera went looking for writers. Fast was good; cheap was better. Fast *and* cheap was perfect. Sparks landed one of the open slots at *Junie Prom*, and by year's end, she was writing several pieces per issue, again juggling various pen names.

Her showcase feature was "Girl to Girl," *Junie Prom*'s advice column. Here, writing as "Bee Sparks," Beatrice dispensed slightly arch wisdom to *Junie*'s young readers:

> Dear Bee:
> I like a boy very much, but it seems we are always fighting.
> —*Janet*

> Dear Janet:
> Are the quarrels partly your fault? Are you jealous, possessive, selfish, or critical? If you are sweet, thoughtful, understanding, and even-tempered, the boy won't be able to quarrel with you.
> —*Bee*

Standard stuff for 1940s America, where men were men, and women were trouble.

Though sales of *Junie Prom* were abysmal, Sparks's column was—somehow—a hit. "She is getting so many letters," said Barbera's publishing partner, Charles Laue, "that I am getting writer's cramp readdressing them to you."

Had anyone thought to look, some details might have stood out. Many of the letters had the same peculiar syntax and came from people like "Vivian Brown of Boise, Idaho"—Sparks's mother, now remarried and relocated. But no one was *buying* these comics, let alone scanning them for subtext. Joseph Barbera pulled the plug after just seven issues, and *Junie Prom* slipped into memory.

Sparks was disappointed, but still hopeful. Barbera had boundless ambition, and when he branched out into theater, he recruited Sparks to cowrite several scripts. One of these, *The Maid and the Martian* (a rom-com with sci-fi elements), ran for seven weeks in Los Angeles, getting strong reviews. A second run (starring a young James Arness, later of *Gunsmoke*) was even more successful, and movie executives began sniffing around.

Then . . . nothing. Barbera returned to animation, teaming with William Hanna to form a cartoon empire; in the next five years, Hanna-Barbera created *The Flintstones, The Jetsons, Huckleberry Hound, Yogi Bear*, and countless other franchises, each one a merchandising bonanza.

If Sparks hoped for a job, she was disappointed. Barbera wrote a letter of recommendation, but that was it. As Hanna-Barbera hit the stratosphere, Sparks could only watch, denied her shot at the big time.

Just keep working, she thought. Eventually, it would pay off. Somebody somewhere would take notice. They would pluck her from the shadows and bathe her in light.

She was thirty-five years old. Then, in a blink, forty-five.

Forty-five. And what could she point to? Nothing unique. A dropout with kids was a dropout with kids. No prize for that.

• • •

In 1961, American International Pictures announced a film version of *The Maid and the Martian* starring Annette Funicello, a onetime Mouseketeer whose career became the template for Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, et al.

By the time Barbera and Sparks's play hit movie houses, however, much had changed. *The Maid and the Martian* was now *Pajama Party*, and Sparks's name was gone from the credits, replaced by a friend of Barbera's. Her name also disappeared from the original stage script, with Barbera receiving sole credit.

What could Sparks do? Joseph Barbera had power, and there was no sense in courting his wrath.

• • •

As she closed in on fifty, Sparks kept writing, kept trying. *If you're not happy*, she thought, *you're doing something wrong. Change it.*

Changing became much easier in 1964 when Sparks and her family left California and resettled six hundred miles away, in a patch of arid highland called "the fraud capital of America."

The Becoming

Fall 1965

The house had six white pillars out front, and looked like something from the antebellum South. With sixteen rooms spread across two levels, Beatrice Sparks's new home in Provo, Utah, was nearly three times bigger than the average American dwelling, and that wasn't counting the large circular driveway or the wooded expanse out back.

To some people, it might have seemed excessive. The older kids were married and starting their own lives; only the youngest remained. But Beatrice and LaVorn had money to spare, and someday, they could resell the place at a profit. In the meantime, it was big enough for family gatherings, even in Utah County.

The house was also a message: *Occupants are wealthy, ambitious, and socially hungry. Powerful allies welcome; apply within.*

In Provo, Sparks role-played the person she wished to be: cultured, educated, plugged-in. She dropped little references to Hollywood, to Joseph Barbera, to writing for the movies. She mentioned UCLA and psychology classes. And of crucial importance in Utah County, she joined social and political groups by the fistful, including the Chatazi Club* (as secretary-treasurer), the similar Phile Teras Club (cochairman), and the Republican Women's Club of Provo (president).

Beatrice Sparks, 1967 (Courtesy of Daily Herald*).*

It was a double act with husband LaVorn, who was district chairman of the Utah Republican Party, district chairman of the Chamber of Commerce, and president of the Utah County Development Association, plus a dozen more positions. Somehow, he also found the time to run for multiple public offices, including city commissioner.

Provo's biggest newspaper, the *Daily Herald*, always had space to fill, and photos of LaVorn and Beatrice—hosting luncheons and dinners, speaking to the GOP faithful, raising money for all the right causes—appeared on a regular basis.

Before long, the networking and exposure would pay off in spades, landing Sparks the biggest break of her professional life, and laying the groundwork for a publishing sensation.

It all sprang from a maddening, inescapable question:

WOULD YOU LIKE TO MAKE MORE MONEY IN JUST A FEW HOURS A WEEK?

• • •

Ringed by saw-toothed mountains and perched nearly a mile above sea level, Utah County—the home of Brigham Young University—is an insular world with its own rules and customs. The resulting culture is hardworking, self-reliant . . . and utterly schizophrenic.

On average, Utah County leads the nation in birth rate, volunteerism, literacy, and personal-income growth.

It also leads the nation in white-collar crime. And Ponzi schemes. And multilevel marketing scams. By some estimates, nearly *three-quarters* of US investment fraud is connected to Utah County.

Most of the perpetrators are Latter-day Saints, and so are most of their victims. Saints, it turns out, are especially ripe for "affinity fraud": the kind that exploits cultural connections. Saints generally trust other Saints, taking their claims at face value.

• • •

In Utah County, you couldn't go anywhere without a friend pushing Amway or something like it, always with the same canned phrases: *Make your own schedule. Be your own boss. Have the life you deserve.*

In the end, they all amounted to the same thing: selling overpriced trinkets to your neighbors and colleagues. You'd start a conversation, then mention vitamins (or cosmetics, or plastic dish sets), and make the pitch.

You know, I'm earning enough doing this . . . (lowers voice) . . . *I might be able to quit my job. You know, work for myself. I could bring you in on it. Maybe.*

Sometimes, it seemed like all of Utah was one giant hustle, everyone selling soap back and forth.

In 1967, a handful of businessmen launched their own version: something called the Family Achievement Institute. The name was perfect

for Utah: sleek and clean, wholesome but serious, vague but hinting at power.

FAI bought giant magazine ads, packed with jump-out phrases:

> This is your ground-floor opportunity!
> Financial success can be yours with an FAI franchise!
> A product that is needed and wanted in virtually every home in America!

And what *was* that product, exactly? It was hard to tell, especially when you were distracted by—

> Make up to $16,320 per month!
> Prestige! Fulfillment! Security!
> Act today!

You had to read the tiny print near the bottom of the page to discover that FAI was actually selling . . . vinyl records. Five-album sets in cardboard cases, each one filled with parenting advice, uplifting stories, and bland spiritual wisdom, all voiced by safe-as-milk celebrities *à la* Pat Boone.

Your job was to buy these records from FAI (up front, eating the whole cost), then resell them to friends or family. Or, really, to anyone. It didn't matter. You *had* to resell them to make back your initial "investment" of three thousand dollars. In 1967, that was nearly 40 percent of a family's yearly income. It was more than a new car.*

Advertisements for FAI ran all over America, especially in Mormon-heavy areas. Even rural Saints got the message via *Improvement Era*, the Church's official magazine. The only real hitch was the records: they didn't exist yet. There was a vague description and some prototypes, but nothing in sellable quantities.

FAI needed dozens of essays written, recorded, edited, and put on vinyl, and they needed them ASAP, so they hired a team of ghostwriters. One of them was a future productivity guru named Stephen Covey, and another was Beatrice Sparks, who had just turned fifty.

Fifty was its own kind of deadline, with its own internal chimes. How long could she try, writing for free or almost free, always *approaching* a breakthrough, but never quite reaching it?

For days, she plowed through the essays, banging them out like pistons. Some she wrote from nothing; some were fix-ups of other people's work. If she flagged or hit a dead end, she could always imagine *him*. The man who would read these scripts—his voice warm and familiar, making the words sparkle. A voice you could trust.

He was the selling point, really. His name and face adorned FAI's magazine ads. "Let me tell you about a fantastic selling market!"

He could open doors and make things happen. *He* could make her a star.

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* From its official history: "Chatazi was a women's club in Provo, Utah, established in 1961. The name came from the Navajo term 'chatazi' which translates to 'the women.' Meetings varied in purpose: exercise, holiday parties, lectures on foreign lands, learning new skills, and service projects."

* Another way to recoup your three thousand dollars was to recruit *other* people as sellers, then take a piece of whatever they made. This widening group quickly formed . . . a pyramid.

A Well-Respected Man

His parents abandoned him. They put him on some church steps and walked away, leaving the rest to fate. He was one month old. Later, he was adopted (and loved) by a middle-aged couple, but still . . . to be left like that. It would make most people bitter.

It made Art Linkletter glad to be alive, and you could see it on his face.

By 1967, when he struck a deal with the Family Achievement Institute, Linkletter was more than famous—he was a kind of National Dad. Genial and sparkle-eyed, warm but never cloying, Linkletter also had a streak of affable mischief: the gentle gleam of a good-hearted prankster.

Art Linkletter in a promotional shot for People Are Funny *(Courtesy of NBC Television).*

He'd made his name in radio, then moved to television, becoming a superstar with *People Are Funny*, a blast of guerrilla chaos that influenced everything from *Borat* to *Bowling for Columbine*. In one segment, a man repeatedly attempted to cash a check written on the side of a giant watermelon; in another, an audience member had to keep a stranger on the telephone for three minutes (without explaining why) to win a prize.

A more ambitious stunt came in 1954 when the show created a fake real estate office, rented a house to a young married couple, arranged (through a separate company) to send the couple on a free vacation—then stole the entire house, removing it from the foundation and hauling it away. Over the next few episodes, Linkletter "helped" the couple (who were given a first-class hotel room) search for the house, sometimes by helicopter. Eventually, Linkletter suggested a local psychic who worked in a carnival tent. Stepping inside, the couple saw their intact house, plus a check for twelve months' rent, a year's supply of groceries, and lots of new clothing and furniture.

The gags were inspired, but what made the show work was Linkletter's unflappable *calm*. Even as the madness escalated, he stayed level, a perfect proxy for viewers.

That trait was crucial to Linkletter's trademark bit, in which he interviewed kids as regular talk-show guests, asking casual, real-life questions. The kids, in turn, gave blunt—often jarring—answers:

> LINKLETTER: What does your mom do?
> GIRL: She's a Sunday School teacher.
> LINKLETTER: What does she do for fun?
> GIRL: She plays poker and drinks beer.

In 1957, Prentice-Hall published a collection of interview highlights. Illustrated by *Peanuts* creator Charles M. Schultz, *Kids Say the Darndest Things!* was a smash, selling more than five million copies.

Through it all, Linkletter just radiated *goodness*. Fame could harden people, turning them cold or wary, but Linkletter gave time and support to all sorts of charities, and was a tireless advocate for adoption. Other husbands played around; Linkletter was crazy about his wife, Lois, and made sure she always knew it. Other dads were stingy with affection; Linkletter hugged his kids at every chance—that's what *real* men did.

Of course, Linkletter also liked being rich, and he slapped his name on countless products. Some were top-notch: Linkletter endorsed Milton Bradley's *The Game of Life*, pushing it to blockbuster status. Others were little more than cash grabs. Enter: the Family Achievement Institute.

Linkletter didn't just narrate for FAI; he was the public face. His picture ran at the top of magazine ads, with blurbs asking, "Are you looking for a GROUND FLOOR OPPORTUNITY?" At the bottom, Linkletter's giant, swooping signature gave an unmistakable message: *You can trust this company.*

For an aspiring writer like Beatrice Sparks, scripting for Art Linkletter was like handing a song to Sinatra. If things went well, your entire life could change.

• • •

Things did *not* go well. FAI's "thrilling opportunity" was a colossal flop. Not even Art Linkletter could convince people to shell out three grand for a bunch of records, much less for records they'd have to resell just to break even. FAI put on a smile, but eventually scrapped the whole project.

As Sparks's big—maybe last—chance disintegrated, she pitched some new projects to Linkletter's son Jack, who screened offers for his father. Jack politely turned everything down but encouraged Sparks to stay in touch.

Stay in touch. Was there a more deflating brush-off?

Sparks, however, was determined to make the most of the Linkletter connection. She only needed the right idea.

Hollywood Ending

Saturday, October 4, 1969

It was 10:00 AM in Los Angeles, and Diane Linkletter's blood was everywhere. Six floors above, in the Shoreham Towers apartments, a kitchen window stood open. Diane had jumped, hit the pavement, and was still breathing. Maybe. The damage made it hard to tell.

As cops pushed everyone back, an ambulance arrived.

Diane, five-two and blond, was alive, but just barely. Police cleared a path, and paramedics tilted Diane to slide a stretcher underneath. It was like moving a bag of broken glass.

They sped to Central Receiving Hospital, where doctors took one look and sent them to USC's medical center, but it was no use. The fall had shattered everything. As the siren wailed, Diane's body gave out. She was three weeks shy of twenty-one.

Back at the Shoreham Towers, police were questioning Edward Durston, the only real witness. Durston, a twenty-seven-year-old car salesman who flitted in and out of celebrity circles, was distraught, but told them what he knew.

Diane, he said, had asked him to come over at around 3:00 AM. They had talked for several hours, just the two of them, and Diane got very upset. Nothing was working. Her father meant well, but his fame made it impossible to be her own person, to find her own voice. She'd done some

acting, but even that felt secondhand, like people were doing her old man a favor. How could you grow in such a big shadow?

Art and Diane Linkletter in autumn 1968, one year before Diane's suicide (Courtesy of CBS Television, Photo Division).

Her personal life was no better. A few years earlier, when she was seventeen, Diane had married another young actor. Both families were opposed, and the pairing soon came apart. Art Linkletter had managed to keep both the marriage *and* the annulment out of the press, which actually made things harder for Diane; it was like living in a sealed box.

Then, three months ago, another hard blow. Despondent over business losses, Diane's brother-in-law had killed himself with a handgun, leaving his wife (Diane's sister Dawn) to find the body.

Diane and Durston had talked about all of this, and by 9:30 AM, Diane seemed to feel better. She got up and went to the kitchen. Moments later, Durston heard a window open. He ran in and saw Diane standing on the ledge. He lunged for her, but only got a handful of drapes.

Now, as Diane headed for the morgue, Durston offered to take a polygraph. Police technicians tested him twice, then ruled him out as a suspect.

Meanwhile, police were searching for Art and Lois Linkletter; nobody wanted them to find out via the press. Authorities eventually found Diane's brother Robert, who didn't have time to process his own shock. The news wouldn't hold much longer.

Art and Lois were in Colorado Springs, where Art was scheduled to speak at the Air Force Academy. Robert phoned the hotel, and when his father came on the line, Robert told him the awful facts. Diane was dead. It had happened that morning, and it looked like suicide.

Then Robert said something else. He said Diane had phoned him before she died, and she told him she'd taken some LSD.

Something to Believe In

In the aftermath of a child's suicide, parents are on thin ice. They're 50 percent more likely to kill themselves. They face mental illness, divorce, and crippling depression. Drugs and alcohol can turn magnetic.*

The first two years are the worst. Make it that far, and you might keep living. If you've got other kids, that helps, because you can't abandon them.

(And you've failed one child already, haven't you?)

That's what the voice says. Late at night, or in the morning sun, or anytime at all. It waits, feigning sleep, curled up inside you like a mass of fishhooks. Then it twists to life, mocking and snapping.

It's your fault.

Even if it's not.

You should have known.

Even if you couldn't have known. Or even if you did know, and tried your best to help.

You should have done more.

Then the voice goes silent. The crying slows a little. You exhale. You want to sleep. You want to die.

If you're religious, that might help. But it might not. It might make things worse.

Suicide is a mortal sin.

Stop it.

You know where mortal sinners go, right?

Please stop.

It's your fault.

If someone offers a loophole—some way to silence the horrid little voice—you'll take it. No matter how wrong or far-fetched, you will find a way to believe.

Sunday, October 5, 1969

Art Linkletter had been awake for nearly thirty-six hours, and he was drawn and bleary, with a dark, manic edge. It was no time to speak with the press.

But he was determined. Diane was his *daughter*, his beautiful little girl, and people had to know. He had to tell them. *It wasn't her fault.*

In his first public statement since Diane's death, Linkletter unloaded.

"It wasn't suicide," he said, his voice thick with fury and grief, "because she wasn't herself. It was murder. She was murdered by the people who manufacture and sell LSD."

It made sense. Especially if you were crazed with guilt and had to believe *something*. In that case, it made all the sense in the world.

Newspapers ran with the story, printing front-page headlines and giant scare quotes: "LSD Killed Diane, Linkletter Charges"; "Diane Linkletter, Victim of LSD"; "Diane Linkletter: Slain by the LSD Sellers."

Then word began to filter out: Diane's body had tested clean for drugs.

Squares and straights didn't believe it, and insisted that she *must* have been high. Hippies and cynics felt vindicated, and denounced the press for its rush to judgment.

The truth was more complicated and far less satisfying. Diane didn't test positive *or* negative for LSD—because no one *checked* her for LSD.

• • •

More than fifty years later, screening for psychedelic drugs remains expensive and time-consuming. Most employers don't test for LSD, and

even the military usually skips it. In 1969, the process was slower, costlier, and prone to mistakes—and that was with a living subject. Postmortem detection of LSD was, as one California crime lab put it, “an impossible request,” so unless directly ordered, toxicologists didn’t bother trying.

By the time Art Linkletter mentioned LSD, Diane’s autopsy was finished and filed, and by the time his comments hit the evening paper, her chemical analysis was already in progress:

> Ethanol: absent
> Barbiturates: absent
> Codeine and Morphine: absent
> Amphetamine and Methamphetamine: absent

Booze, downers, opiates, speed. That was all they tested for. Everything else was, and would forever remain, a maddening, unknowable blank.

But unknowable blanks don’t sell newspapers, so corrections—when they came at all—usually kept it simple: *No trace of drugs in Linkletter death*.

For the Linkletter family, this vague result increased the agony. Nothing could bring Diane back or stem the family’s heartache, but the LSD story had at least provided a reason. It had answered the *why*, and that mattered. Without the *why*, there was nothing to do but wonder, and wondering could kill you.

So the story changed.

For years, LSD users had whispered about “flashbacks”: short, unexpected freak-outs that happened days (or even months) after a drug trip. There was no proof that flashbacks existed, but everyone spoke like an expert. And LSD research was illegal, so you could claim almost anything. Who could disprove it?

It was enough to grab on to, and by late October, Art Linkletter had a version of reality he could live with.

“What we didn’t know,” he told the *San Francisco Examiner*, “is that she was having involuntary flashbacks. It was in one of these flashbacks that she killed herself.”

By year's end, it was gospel. Every kid in every schoolyard knew about the girl who jumped from a window during a flashback. *Thank you for flying LSD airlines, enjoy your trip. (Don't forget your parachute!)*

It was hilarious. A real stitch.

The October news cycle was already overstuffed. Police were still hunting for Sharon Tate's killers. Woodstock was barely over; ditto Altamont; ditto Chappaquiddick. Oh, and humans had just *walked on the fucking moon*. Yet Diane's death was inescapable. In the first month, nearly two thousand newspaper stories made the LSD/suicide connection, and even that paled next to the public response. Within ten days of Diane's death, Art Linkletter got more than twenty-five thousand letters of support.

Three time zones away, the White House took notice.

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* As will become grimly clear in later chapters, this dynamic extends beyond family. Four days after Diane's suicide, an acquaintance who lived across the street grew despondent over Diane's death and killed herself with an overdose of sleeping pills.

Us and Them

Richard Nixon had built his career on schism and slander.

Campaigning for the Senate in 1950, Nixon had smeared his opponent, Helen Douglas, as a Communist dupe, telling crowds, “She’s pink . . . right down to her underwear.”

Two years later, as Dwight Eisenhower’s running mate, Nixon had exploited class envy, responding to financial-corruption charges with a televised speech touting his meager income and his wife’s budget wardrobe (including her “respectable, Republican cloth coat”).

Now, as president, Nixon was playing to the great, angry middle: the “silent majority” who went to work, came home, paid their bills, and went to bed, all without getting high or starting a riot. They were Nixon’s base. Everyone else was the enemy, and enemies were fair game.

As America turned on itself in the late sixties, Nixon saw an opening—a way to please the faithful while crushing the activist left. A war on drugs.

“We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or Black,” Nixon’s domestic policy advisor, John Ehrlichman, admitted in 1994, “but by criminalizing [drugs] heavily, we could disrupt those communities . . . arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news.

“Did we know we were lying about the drugs?” asked Ehrlichman. “Of course we did.”

But how to sell the crackdown? They needed an angle, some kind of gimmick.

Then Diane Linkletter killed herself, and Nixon aides had their solution. The president should send a letter of condolence. With luck, Art Linkletter would read it on television, boosting the president's good-guy image and underscoring the need for action.

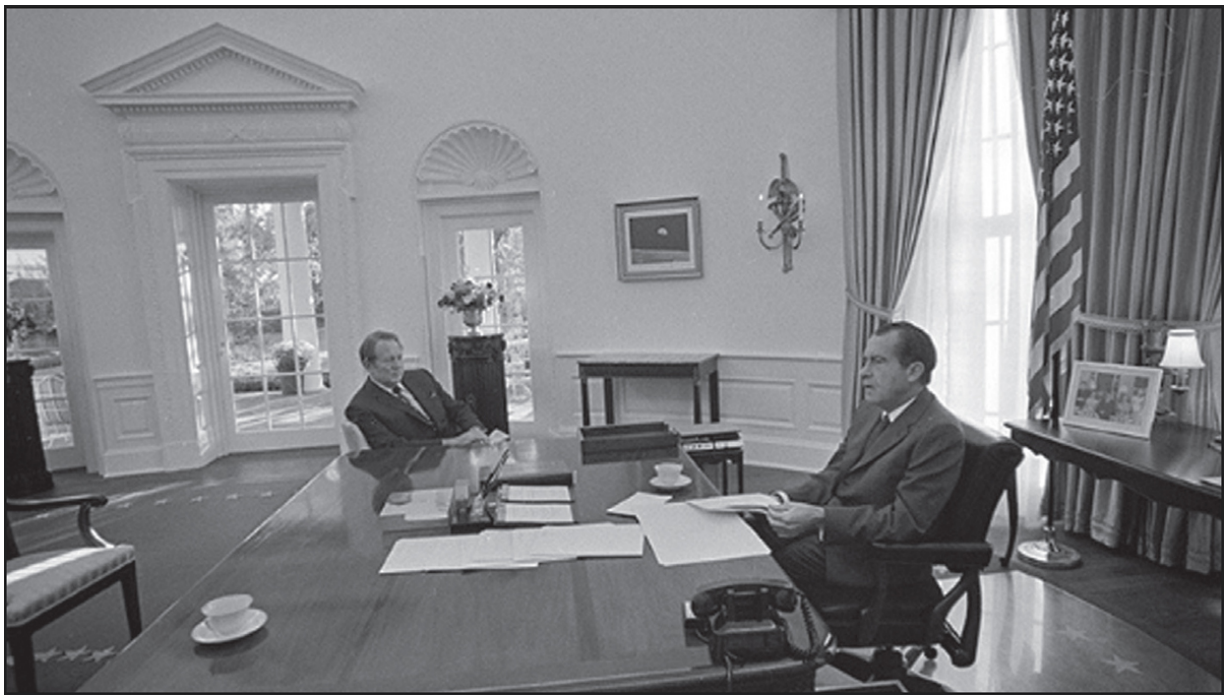
The actual payoff was even bigger. On October 23, just three weeks after his daughter's suicide, Linkletter was at the White House, a lachrymose prop for Nixon's culture war.

Diane Linkletter, said Nixon as cameras whirred and Art nodded, was no scum-crusted hippie but "a well-educated, intelligent girl from a Christian family."

Ergo, the drugs were to blame. They had to be. To admit (or even suspect) otherwise was to contemplate the abyss.

Nixon wanted more laws and more power to enforce them. If Congress played ball, Nixon said, then government would soon have "the necessary weapons to attack this whole problem."

As things wrapped up, Nixon shared another idea with Linkletter. The media was doing a piss-poor job at fighting drug use. It was all so dull and *educational*. Wouldn't something *exciting* be better? Something with real entertainment value? That, said Nixon, could have a tremendous impact.



Art Linkletter and Richard Nixon in the Oval Office, October 23, 1969 (Photo by Ollie Atkins; courtesy of Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum).

"I couldn't agree more," said Linkletter.

Leaving the White House, Linkletter was emboldened. The president of the United States wanted something done about drugs. He wanted a *message sent*. Would Linkletter help?

Damned right he would. Diane was dead, and it was time to make someone pay. And if you thought he was kidding, you only had to listen.

"When you lose a beautiful young girl at the beginning of her life," Linkletter told the House Select Committee on Crime that autumn, "there is no one you won't attack."

The chuckling everydad was gone, and in his place was a cold, avenging father.

"I will attack commercial enterprises," he continued. "I will attack my own media. I will attack anybody who stands in the way of our progress against this scourge."

• • •

At his worst moments, Linkletter thought about murder, about seeing Diane's dealers suffer and die, snuffed out like sentient flames. It wouldn't be hard. He was famous and rich. If he asked the right people, he could make it happen. He was sure of it.

I could do it, he thought. *For Diane*.

Then he would spiral, his mind going red with hate. *We should kill them all—every last dealer. Just round them up and toss them in a hole. Let them rot.*

At a speech in Boca Raton, the crowd (mostly businessmen and wives) expected midtempo blather: *We, as a nation, must come together . . . etc., etc.* Instead, they got rage. Someone mentioned Timothy Leary, the former Harvard psychologist whose incessant promotion of LSD had made him a counterculture icon. Linkletter's face darkened.

“If I ever get my hands on him,” he said of Leary, “so help me God, I’ll kill him.”

Linkletter wasn’t running for office or angling for a talk show. He didn’t need money or even want it—not anymore. Nothing mattered but payback.

Inevitably, the leeches gathered.

“I began to hear from people,” said Linkletter years later, “and their line would go something like this: ‘Awfully sorry about your daughter, Art. If you want to feel better, let me use your name in my project.’”

Some of those people meant well. Others only wanted to feed.

“At the time,” said Linkletter, “I was too confused and angry to tell the difference.”

And that’s when Beatrice Sparks reappeared—with the most *amazing* story.

Read Between the Lines

For three years, Sparks had peppered Art Linkletter with ideas, and nothing had stuck. She was fifty-three, with two grown kids, another in high school, and a string of fizzled projects. Her first book, a self-improvement guide published by the Church, had sold in Utah County, but just barely.*

Then, in rapid succession, everything changed.

Diane Linkletter died, and her father became a scorched-earth crusader.

In June, the Manson trial started. All those sweet young girls, warped and destroyed by a monster who fed them acid and stole their minds.

And on October 27, 1970, one year after bringing Art Linkletter to the White House, Richard Nixon got his War on Drugs. Just like that, LSD, mescaline, psilocybin, and even marijuana were Schedule I drugs, right next to heroin.

Beatrice Sparks had found her moment, and she pitched Art Linkletter on a new project: a simple story with a shocking twist.

It was the tale of a bright but troubled California teen. A girl from a good, Christian family. A girl whose parents loved her.

Dosed with LSD by sleazy “friends,” the girl slipped into addiction and chaos. Harder drugs followed, and things got worse. She ran away from home, falling in with outcasts and criminals. Flashbacks came without warning, pushing her closer to madness.

The girl fought to stay clean, but in the end, it was too much. She died without warning, leaving her parents to grieve and wonder.

Then came the *real* twist. The story was true, the girl left a diary, and Beatrice Sparks had it.

• • •

The Bad Crowd, the seduction into drug life, the LSD madness, the death that only *seemed* like a suicide. It was the perfect pitch at the perfect time. It was, after all, a story Art Linkletter already believed.

In a different state of mind, he might have asked some tough questions. Where was a homeless junkie getting pen and paper, much less storing them? What kind of addict keeps track of a diary, or little jotted notes?

And didn't the whole thing sound a little too *familiar,* like a way to leverage Diane's death?*

In the moment, none of it mattered. Of *course* the timeline was jumbled—junkies were erratic, everyone knew that. And the similarities just proved it was true. *You see? It happens. Just like it did to Diane.*

And where did Sparks *get* this diary?

That part changed with every telling, sometimes a little, sometimes a lot, but the basic framework was always the same: Sparks met "Alice" at a youth conference in 1970. The two became friends, and after the girl died, Sparks thought her diaries—properly presented—would be a strong warning about drug abuse.

Sparks had it all planned out. She would cut the diary down to book size, change a few names, and presto—one cautionary tale, ready to sell. She even had a title. *Buried Alive: The Diary of an Anonymous Teenager, edited by Beatrice Sparks*.

There were a million loose ends. Who was this girl? Where were her parents? Was this even legal? But Linkletter's reaction was all that mattered, and he was on board. His literary agency, Vandeburg/Linkletter, signed a deal with Sparks, and Clyde Vandeburg, who did most of the agency's actual work, went looking for a publisher.

• • •

Since the day her father walked out, Sparks had pushed herself. First to sustain her family, then to survive on her own, then to break through as a writer. She'd worked every angle, used every trick and tactic, keeping the faith long after most people would have given up.

Now it was finally—*finally*—on the horizon. In just a few weeks, it would be 1971. Beatrice Sparks would turn fifty-four, and *Buried Alive* would get a new title.

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* The book, *Key to Happiness*, had a gosh-wow tilt toward dating and marriage: "Do pluck your eyebrows!"; "Use deodorant frequently and generously"; "Marriage is fun and exciting, but it can be a lot more fun and exciting if you are skilled and experienced in the field of homemaking."

* Indeed, *Alice*'s epilogue originally asked, "Was it accidental overdose? Premeditated overdose? *Flashback?* [emphasis added]" The flashback reference was deleted before publication.

Rabbit from the Hat

Kathryn Fitzgerald stared into the shopping bag. This didn't look like any book *she'd* ever seen. There were scraps of random paper and pieces torn from grocery bags, plus a bunch of diary pages, all shoved into a large paper sack.

It was a Friday afternoon in late 1970. Fitzgerald, a twenty-eight-year-old New York native with the beginnings of a nicotine rasp, looked a moment longer, then spoke.

"Let me take it home and read it."

Fitzgerald hadn't planned to work in kids' books—it just sort of *happened*. She had a finance background, including a stint with the Small Business Administration and four years as a portfolio analyst. Even when she made the jump to publishing, it was strictly grown-up stuff, handling business and finance titles for Prentice-Hall, a company based in northeast New Jersey, across the river from Manhattan.

Still, upward was upward, and when the head of children's books retired, Fitzgerald sought the position and got it.

Prentice-Hall mostly published nonfiction, and their biggest seller had come thirteen years earlier, with Art Linkletter's *Kids Say the Darndest Things*, which (despite the *Peanuts*-style drawings) was aimed at adults.

Books for children were a different story. They took years (sometimes decades) to gain momentum, then lingered forever, mainly by default. *Anne of Green Gables*, *The Call of the Wild*, the Little House novels—they were

safe, solid choices, purchased by every new parent or first-year teacher. That was the irony of kids' books: they were usually chosen by adults.*

To make a dent in the young-reader market, a book had to be lucky—and special. So when Clyde Vandeburg pitched what looked like a bag of receipts, Kathryn Fitzgerald was intrigued, but not very hopeful.

A diary. In pieces. Found by some Mormon psychotherapist. Right.

She took it home and started reading. Before long, she was convinced . . . mostly. Later, the doubts would resurface, and she'd argue against calling it "real," but the diary *felt* true, no question.

This, she thought, *is something special.*

Within a few days, things were locked in. Sparks would get a few thousand dollars up front, and if the book was a hit, she'd eventually get royalties. Most books didn't make it that far, but you never knew. Linkletter's agency would take 10 percent of Sparks's end, including the advance.

Sparks signed the contact, and *Buried Alive* was slated for an autumn 1971 release.

• • •

Then things got bumpy. First, the title had to go. *Buried Alive* sounded like a Karloff movie.

Sparks had suggestions—something about a collapsing carousel—but all were flat, or corny, or both. It needed something sharp, something snappy.

One afternoon, as Fitzgerald brainstormed, she heard someone singing. A male voice, coming from down the hall.

"And one pill makes you small . . ."

A young sales executive named Michael Shay walked past Fitzgerald's office.

"And the ones that mother gives you don't do anything at all . . ."

It was "White Rabbit," Jefferson Airplane's psychedelic pop smash from four years prior.

Fitzgerald got up and went after Shay, who was still half humming, his voice trailing down the hallway.

“Go ask Alice, when she’s ten feet—”

“Mike!”

A startled Shay turned to see Fitzgerald standing behind him.

“This man,” Fitzgerald announced to the office, grabbing Shay by the shoulders, “is a genius.”

Then she went back to work. There was a bigger problem to fix. Beatrice Sparks, who had waited so long for this moment, was already threatening to quit.

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* Even S. E. Hinton’s switchblade romance, *The Outsiders*, initially bombed with young readers. (*Gangs who say “golly”? No thanks.*) But teachers loved it (*Gangs who say “golly”? Perfect!*), and by the mid-seventies, it was a high school standard.

Changes

Sparks couldn't believe what she was hearing. Prentice-Hall wanted her name off the book. Off the book *she* had brought them.

"*Go Ask Alice* by Anonymous." That's what they wanted. No mention of Sparks at *all*, not as editor or anything else. It was too *adult*, they said.

Kids don't want to be lectured, not by a grown-up. Keep it clean and simple. "Go Ask Alice *by Anonymous." It's better.*

Really? Better for whom?

Sparks's agent, Clyde Vandeburg, talked about the money, missing Sparks's real priority. If *Alice* performed, she could use it as a springboard—a way to get more book deals. But that only worked if her *name* was on it. And where did Prentice-Hall *get* this diary, anyway? From *her*. She'd handed it to them, and now they wanted to erase her? Fat chance. And why wasn't Vandeburg pushing back? What were agents for?

Vandeburg explained again, and this time, Sparks understood. It wasn't Prentice-Hall's idea. Vandeburg—her *own agent*—had suggested it.

Sparks went nuclear. After thirty years of climbing, and with the top in sight, she wasn't taking her name off anything. She'd walk first, and said as much. Maybe they'd rather have no book at all—how about that?

Time to get a lawyer.

• • •

At first glance, Sparks had a valid complaint. Removing her name from *Alice* seemed egregious and unfair, the worst kind of know-it-all meddling. *Never mind the credit, little lady. Just take the money and smile.*

That the idea came from her own agent was even more galling. Vandeburg was supposed to represent Sparks's interests, and *only* Sparks's interests. Instead, he'd sold her out, and still got 10 percent.

But Sparks didn't have much leverage. By her own account, she'd only "assembled" the dead girl's writing, and even then, it wasn't finished. (It showed up in a *paper bag*, after all.) Kathryn Fitzgerald was the hands-on editor; *she* was turning the scraps and notes into a real, sellable book.

That made Beatrice Sparks . . . a courier.

Really, when you thought about it, Sparks had no reason to expect *any* kind of credit. A finder's fee, sure. Even royalties, if *Alice* performed. But a credit? For what?

Vandeburg might also have sensed what Linkletter couldn't: Beatrice Sparks was a walking correction. When she talked about the dead girl, dates and details shifted, almost at random. Alice died in May, but sometimes November. Alice gave Sparks the diary, except when her parents did it. Sparks occasionally mentioned "interview tapes" she'd made with Alice, but nobody ever heard them.

When discussing her own past, Sparks was no better. Had she *attended* UCLA or actually graduated? Was she a psychiatrist or a psychologist? Or was it psychotherapist? Had she really taught at BYU?*

Either Sparks was lying—about nearly everything—or she had a strange kind of amnesia. Regardless, she was a risk. Putting her name on *Go Ask Alice* would mean interviews, and interviews could spell disaster, no matter how true the story was.

Art Linkletter was throwing his weight behind *Alice*, and Vandeburg wasn't about to kill the project. Sparks would get paid, and if things went well, she'd get another book deal. But her name on the cover? Not happening.

To Kathryn Fitzgerald, the no-name approach made perfect sense. Connecting with readers meant stepping back and letting the dead girl speak; it was *her* story, after all, and a looming adult presence would muffle the impact. Besides, "Anonymous" was intriguing—it got people talking.

• • •

Sparks's lawyer, meanwhile, apparently saw the obvious: Sparks was cooked. She could fight her publisher *or* her agent, but not both. If she dug in, they'd find a way to void the deal, and even if they didn't, she'd be hobbled right out of the gate; she'd be a malcontent, with no support from anyone.

It was an impossible choice—and no choice at all.

On February 2, 1971, Sparks's lawyer penned a letter agreeing to the deal. Page two held the gist:

> As you already know, Mrs. Sparks is dedicated to assisting young people through the new book, and is willing to remain anonymous in order to get the message before the public.

Beatrice Sparks had just been erased from her breakthrough.

---

* When living in Southern California, Sparks claimed to have attended college in Utah. When living in Utah, she claimed to have attended college in Southern California.

Know Your Enemy

Tuesday, May 18, 1971

Art Linkletter pulled up to the White House gate. After a moment, it swung open, and the car drove through. Then the gate closed again.

Two weeks earlier, the city had ruptured. More than eight thousand anti-war protesters had flooded the streets, smashing windows and opening hydrants. Garbage cans were set ablaze and tossed into traffic; nails and glass rained down from bridges, striking cars and clogging roads. By night's end, police had arrested seven thousand people, and the jails were full; to hold the overflow, authorities commandeered a nearby football field. Smoke and tear gas drifted across the river, into homes, into stores.

The next morning, commuters stopped and stared. On every bridge, hundreds of Marines stood in formation, rifles loaded and ready.

Inside the White House, Richard Nixon—on the brink of a Vietnam drawdown—was planning a new assault, this one at home. Just seven months into the Drug War, Nixon wanted to escalate, crushing the potheads and speed freaks, and jailing the radical left. He'd need congressional sign-off, and was prepping himself in the usual way, spending time with sycophants.

Within a year, Art Linkletter would soften his views on marijuana, part of a slow, steady move toward the middle, and by 1980, he'd lead the call for drug treatment, renouncing his *lock-'em-up* stance in favor of science

and compassion. Until then, the prohibitionists would wring him for every dollar and every vote, every bit of moral support.

As the lunch hour passed, Nixon and Linkletter talked about the drug issue—two wealthy, aging white men squinting through a keyhole.

> LINKLETTER: Another big difference between alcohol and marijuana is that when people smoke marijuana, they smoke it to get high. When most people drink, they drink to be sociable.
>
> NIXON: A person does not drink to get drunk.
>
> LINKLETTER: That's right.
>
> NIXON: A person drinks to have fun.

This being Nixon, the conversation soon turned racist, with Linkletter in parrot mode:

> NIXON: Asia, the Middle East, portions of Latin America . . . I've seen what drugs have done to those countries. Everybody knows what it's done to the Chinese. The Indians are hopeless anyway. The Burmese—
>
> LINKLETTER: That's right.
>
> NIXON: Why are the Communists so hard on drugs? It's because they love to booze. I mean, the Russians, they drink pretty good.
>
> LINKLETTER: That's right.
>
> NIXON: The Swedes drink too much, the Finns drink too, the British have always been heavy boozers, and the Irish, of course, the most, but on the other hand, they survive as strong races.
>
> LINKLETTER: That's right.
>
> NIXON: At least with liquor, I don't lose motivation.

• • •

One month later, on June 17, Nixon made his case to Congress, seeking (and receiving) an additional $84 million and greater jailing powers. There would be money for treatment, but that was mostly a smoke screen, and medical funding would soon disappear, replaced by mandatory minimums and no-knock warrants.

It was time, said Nixon, “to tighten the noose around the necks of drug peddlers.”

He finished his speech with a reference to *the children*:

> The threat of narcotics among our people is one which properly frightens many Americans. It comes quietly into homes and destroys children, it moves into neighborhoods and breaks the fiber of community which makes neighbors.
>
> We must try to better understand the confusion and disillusion and despair that bring people, particularly young people, to the use of narcotics and dangerous drugs.

Days later, advance copies of *Go Ask Alice* went out to reviewers.

Knock ’Em Dead, Kid

June 1971

The design was striking and simple, just five crimson words on a bright yellow cover:

Go Ask Alice
Author Anonymous

There was no “fiction” or “nonfiction” label, but the presentation made it clear that *Alice* was the real thing.

> *Go Ask Alice* is based on the actual diary of a fifteen-year-old drug user . . . names, dates, places and certain events have been changed in accordance with the wishes of those concerned.

The back-cover blurbs were all business:

> *Go Ask Alice* is an extraordinary document. It is the raw and painful story of a young girl’s experiments with acid, pot and pills. I strongly recommend it to all parents concerned about the health and well-being of their children.
>
> —Art Linkletter

> *Go Ask Alice* gives a true glimpse into the beginner's drug world. Whereas every person indulging in drug experimentation says, 'It can't happen to me,' we who work with such problems know that psychological addiction as well as physical addiction can and does happen to young people.
>
> —Dr. Myron Greenbaum, Psychiatrist specializing in drug problems

If Doctor Greenbaum's title was a little vague, no one paid much attention. Words like "true" and "actual" and "document" steered reviewers toward belief. *This*, they warned parents, *is what you are up against.*

"A book that all teenagers and parents of teenagers should really read," said the *Boston Globe.*

"An important book, this deserves as wide a readership as libraries can give it," said *Library Journal.*

"A book which should be read, and once started is almost impossible to turn away from," said *Publishers Weekly*. "The timeless confusion of adolescence is invested with the terrifying new ingredient of drugs for most teenagers these days, and this document is an eloquent look at what it must be like in the vortex."

• • •

In her office at Prentice-Hall, Kathryn Fitzgerald put several clippings into an envelope, then added a quick note to Beatrice Sparks.

"Dear Bea," Fitzgerald began. "Enclosed are the first reviews to come in on *Go Ask Alice*. Naturally, we are delighted and hope you will be equally pleased."

Then, perhaps remembering Sparks's irritation at being deleted, Fitzgerald re-stressed the case for anonymity. "I've talked with many bookstore people," she wrote, "and they are terribly excited about *Alice*, feeling that as one teenager who doesn't moralize talking to *other* teenagers, the book will have a definite positive impact."

A few days later, the letter arrived in North Provo. Sparks sliced open the envelope and read Fitzgerald's message. Inside were a bunch of reviews.

Anonymous.

Anonymous.

Anonymous.

• • •

At Prentice-Hall, expectations were cautiously high. Hardcover books usually sold in the range of five thousand copies. Closer to ten, if you got lucky.

The week before publication, advance orders for *Go Ask Alice* passed 18,000 copies.

"It blew the roof off," said Kathryn Fitzgerald in 2018. "We didn't print anywhere *near* the amount of copies we needed."

Prentice-Hall was jubilant, if a little stunned, and they now risked an ironic success: a bestselling book that no one could buy.

They rushed a second printing, then a third, then a fourth. Maybe, just maybe, this was the start of something big.

True Believers

October 1971

Denise was seventeen, and knew a lot about secrets.

A year earlier, her family had moved from Connecticut down to Aiken, South Carolina. Kind of square for her taste, but at least it was easy to make an impression. Denise with her long, straight hair and her navy pea coat, and her miniskirt made from a Union Jack—they'd never seen anything like it. And even in a town like Aiken, Denise knew how to have fun: boys and music, and boys who *made* music. Especially guitarists.

The drug scene was also a little more intense. On the weekends, Denise snuck off to parties, and someone would put out a big bowl of pills. You'd pop one and see what happened. It could have been anything, but that just fed the excitement.

She tried LSD, and didn't like it *one bit*; that was the wrong kind of wasted. But she kept going out. Getting high and losing herself.

Her parents had no clue, of course. Like the time she hitched a ride with some guy on the highway. Her mom and dad would have freaked if they'd known.

As the months wore on, however, Denise got a little freaked out herself. She was starting to fray at the edges, and wondered about scaling things down.

In October, a teacher at Aiken High School asked for volunteers to review a new book. It was an anonymous diary called *Go Ask Alice*.

Denise hadn't heard of it, but she flipped through the pages and decided to give it a try.

Before long, she had the strangest sensation. This anonymous girl *understood her*.

Two weeks later, Denise and her new boyfriend, a clean-living senior named Johnny, wrote a shared review for the *Aiken Standard*, zeroing in on the book's real magic.

"It may be hard to believe an adult," they wrote, "but it's simple to believe the diary of a sad girl."

• • •

For once, teens and grown-ups agreed on something.

> *Go Ask Alice* is required reading for teenagers and for anyone who cares about them.
>
> —Joseph Bennett, *Indianapolis News*, September 25, 1971
>
> This is an actual diary of a lovely, happy 15-year-old girl who turns to drugs. What is frightening about it is that it could happen here! Parents should read this intense book. It is simply and directly a diary of a good girl led down the dreadful road of drugs to death.
>
> —Mary Williams, *Argus-Leader*, October 3, 1971
>
> Alice is a real girl, a 15-year-old who kept a diary that will haunt everyone who reads it.
>
> —Barbara Hodge Hall, *Anniston Star*, November 7, 1971
>
> She was 15 years old when she began to keep a diary, and she had no way of knowing that what began as the typical penciled

> scribblings of a bright adolescent would soon be written in blood . . . a journey below and beyond hell.
> —Robert Sorenson, *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, September 12, 1971

In January 1972, the American Library Association announced its Best New Books for Young Readers—their ten picks from the previous year. Even by “best of” standards, 1971 had been exceptional, and the list included Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, and S. E. Hinton’s own teenage drug tale, *That Was Then, This Is Now*.

And there, above them all—it didn’t seem possible—sat the pitch-black diary of a nameless dead girl.

Civil War

Tuesday, March 21, 1972

In the East Room of the White House, its gold silk curtains closed against the daylight, six dozen people watched the president fiddle with a custom-made pen. Down one side of the blue plastic barrel, it said *Richard Nixon* in slanted white cursive.

Out in the audience, Art Linkletter sat surrounded by congressmen, assorted sidekicks, three brigadier generals, and a crush of reporters.

Finally, Nixon was ready.

"Today," he said, "I am pleased to sign into law the Drug Abuse Office and Treatment Act of 1972, a bipartisan bill designed to mount a frontal assault on our number one public enemy."

Over the next few minutes, Nixon tried to stay balanced, but he kept giving the game away. In addition to "frontal assault" and "number one public enemy" and "wipe out," he said "attack" three different times. Still, he plunged forward, doing his best to sound moderate.

"As we increase our efforts in law enforcement," he said, "what we must do is increase our efforts to treat the addicts, to treat them and also reduce the demand, through a program of education and prevention across this country."

Nixon didn't quite believe this. In truth, he thought the bill was weak tea, the babying of degenerates. That it was precisely the bill he'd

demanded didn't matter. Like the addicts he despised, Nixon was always chasing the next big score, and once he got it, all he noticed were the flaws.

Take the name: the Drug Abuse Office and Treatment Act of 1972. *Treatment*. Like it was polio or something. They were *junkies*, for Christ's sake, so who really cared? Junkies didn't vote.

Sure, Nixon had given lip service to treatment, but that's all it was; he hadn't really *meant* it. Didn't Congress understand? You *said* "treatment," then knocked heads. That's how the game worked. But Congress hadn't gotten the message. Now there'd be more coddling, as though junkies hadn't been coddled enough.

It was the same with the Shafer Commission, created to study the impact of marijuana.

Give me the facts, Nixon had told them.

What he'd meant, of course, was, *Give me ammunition.*

"I want a goddamned strong statement on marijuana," Nixon had told his chief enforcer, Bob Haldeman. "Can I get that out of this sonofabitching [commission]? I mean, one on marijuana that just tears the ass out of them. Against legalizing, and all that sort of thing."

"Sure," Haldeman had replied.

But it hadn't worked out that way.

On this very morning, just hours before signing the new drug law, Nixon had gotten a preview of the commission's marijuana report. The fourteen members were agreed: marijuana should be decriminalized.

Decriminalized.

Jesus. What was *wrong* with people? Was it so hard to just follow directions? This, thought Nixon, was what happened when you put Jews and eggheads in charge, especially when it came to drugs.

"Every one of the bastards that are out for legalizing marijuana is Jewish," Nixon had railed to Haldeman a few months earlier. "What the Christ is the matter with the Jews, Bob? What is the matter with them?"

Haldeman, who had endured many speeches on this topic, just waited.

"I suppose it's because most of them are psychiatrists," Nixon had concluded before moving on to other business.

Now, even as Nixon signed the new drug bill, he was already planning to ignore the report on marijuana. *Stick it in a drawer and get on with the crackdown*. That's what people wanted, and Nixon would deliver.

He made a few more remarks, then adjourned the gathering. Art Linkletter and the rest of the audience stood and applauded. Nixon walked out of the East Room and headed back to the Oval Office, trailed by Haldeman.

This time, they left Linkletter behind. Maybe they'd heard about his recent comments.

• • •

It had happened in Charleston, West Virginia, where Linkletter was speaking to parents and teachers. Someone asked about marijuana, soon to be labeled a "gateway drug."

Instead of hard-line gospel—*round up the dealers and throw the switch*—the crowd heard something peculiar.

"I now agree with young people who believe there is an unwarranted hysteria concerning marijuana," said Linkletter. "If the citizenry, police, and courts would stop worrying about the relatively minor problem of marijuana, we might go a lot further toward correcting the major problems of hard-drug use."

It was a small but significant change, and within two years, Art Linkletter would say the unimaginable: *I was wrong. There must be a middle path.*

• • •

Richard Nixon didn't do middle paths. He saw every problem as a personal challenge, if not a personal insult. Liberals, psychiatrists, Jews, hippies, draft dodgers, dope smokers—they were like goddamned cockroaches, creeping around and waggling their fucking antennae. You couldn't back down or learn to "get along." You had to smash the bastards, make them pay. That was how you won.

Back in the Oval Office, Nixon derided the bill he'd just signed. "Who cares about the treating of addicts?" he snorted.

Chief of Staff Bob Haldeman concurred. Treatment was crap, just another word for surrender. People wanted *answers*, not a bunch of theories.

Nixon agreed. The only solution was to enforce the goddamned laws. To really get out there and just kick the hell out of things. After all, there were *children* to protect.

Or so they had read.

“Mothers don’t care about treatment,” said Haldeman, “because their kids aren’t addicts. You just don’t worry about that. What you worry about is some son of a bitch that’s going to slip a packet of marijuana to your kid.”

“Or heroin,” Nixon said gravely.

“Or heroin,” agreed Haldeman.

“Or,” said Nixon, “give them a fix. LSD or something—”

“LSD, right,” finished Haldeman, in words that might have made Beatrice Sparks dance. “Slip some LSD in his Coca-Cola.”

Rhapsody in Black

Sunday, May 7, 1972

Morning dawned cloudy and brisk in New York City, the smells of steam and wet pavement mixing with car exhaust. On newsstands and doorsteps across the city, arm-straining editions of the *New York Times* recapped the week's political news, explored Yugoslavian chess tactics, and gave tips on lowcal French dining. ("The magic words, spoken firmly to the patron or captain before you order, are '*en regime*'—'on a diet.'")

But nothing in that day's *Times* would have quite the same impact as Webster Schott's two-page article, "What Do YAs Read?"

• • •

Book critic Webster Schott was lean and narrow at forty-four, and despite hailing from Queens, he looked like a Rockwell painting—call it *The Rangy Kansan*.

The *Times* called Schott a freelance critic, which usually meant a striver; someone hustling for a full-time gig. Schott, however, already had a day job: vice president of Hallmark, whose greeting cards, stickers, and other prechewed sentiment brought in $300 million a year.

The irony was misleading. Schott was a missionary for language, and his writing pulsed with the sheer, exultant passion of a word lover. At Hallmark, he used the company's clout to deepen its content, licensing work from T. S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, and once—for a Christmas collection—three poems by Trappist monk (and renunciate anarchist) Thomas Merton. Schott also advised the National Endowment for the Arts, where his fellow panelists included Toni Morrison, Edward Albee, and Kurt Vonnegut.

In other words, Webster Schott's opinion mattered, and in the *New York Times*, it had the weight of revelation.

On that Sunday in 1972, the *Times*'s million-and-a-half readers woke up to this:

> One extraordinary work for teenagers, an anonymous 'diary' called *Go Ask Alice*, records the entry of 15-year-old Alice into the world of drugs and sex, and follows her through trips, runaways, near insanity, and finally death (perhaps murder, possibly self-induced) after several months of taking 'Dexie,' marijuana, 'copilots,' LSD, heroin, everything.
>
> A superior work, surely written by an experienced hand and freely adapted from whatever source, *Go Ask Alice* is a document of horrifying reality and possesses literary quality.

Schott had his doubts (he put "diary" in quotes, after all), but they were overshadowed by that final line: "A document of horrifying reality." Whatever his reservations, Webster Schott—of the *New York* Fucking *Times*—believed. More than that, he endorsed:

> *Go Ask Alice* is No. 1 on the American Library Association's list of Best Books for Young Adults 1971. Unfortunately, not many teenagers are reading it, but adults are. It's the kind of book we wish our young would take to heart.

Like most reviewers, Schott cut *Alice* a lot of slack: nobody wanted to stomp on the writing of a dead teenage girl. But there were more personal

factors. Schott's own daughter had just turned sixteen, and was, according to Schott, "beautiful, sometimes distant, and occasionally angry." She was a wonderful, frightening mystery—not unlike Alice herself.

The other reasons were darker. Schott had lost a close friend to suicide, and another acquaintance (a young woman, no less) had recently suffered a meltdown on LSD. Both had sought psychiatric help, only to discover a paradox: in America, mental health was both undervalued and overpriced.

That was another sad fact in *Alice*'s favor. Trauma was no longer remote or unlikely. The danger was in your own town, maybe your own home. Like Art Linkletter before him, Webster Schott was primed to see *Alice* as true, whatever its flaws and gaps.

To Prentice-Hall, Schott's review was printed gold. Avon Books was prepping the *Alice* paperback, and Schott's key phrase ("an extraordinary work . . . a document of horrifying reality") would fit nicely on the back cover. The front was already done; it showed a girl in half shadow, her expression all pain and mystery. *Go Ask Alice, by Anonymous*, said the rounded font, along with three new words: *A Real Diary*.

Inside, on the splash page, a little piece of brilliance:

> Sugar and spice
> And everything nice
> Acid and smack
> And no way back.

Clampdown

Not every adult was so thrilled.

"Another day, another blowjob."

Illinois State Representative Webber Borchers blinked and looked again.

> Another day, another blowjob. If I don't give Big Ass a blow he'll cut off my supply.

This was what his eleven-year-old granddaughter was reading? Borchers flipped through the pages:

> Here I am out peddling drugs for a low class queer.
>
> So maybe I am pregnant. So what. There's a pre-med drop out wandering around somewhere who will take care of it. Or maybe some goddamn prick would stomp on me during a freak out and I'd lose it anyway.
>
> I've got a fucking head cold and I feel miserable, and my period has started and I don't have any Tampax. Hell, I wish I had a shot.

That was that. Borchers confiscated the book and told his granddaughter to read something else.

As the days went by, Borchers, sixty-five, kept wondering. *Do you suppose . . .?* Finally, he decided to check for himself, and headed to the Decatur Public Library, a low-slung building on North Street.

Sure enough, there it was, and in the children's section, no less.

This, thought Borchers, *should not be allowed.*

Lots of grown-ups were having the same thought, seeing *Alice* as thinly veiled porn. But Borchers had sway, legal and otherwise. He was an old-school pol in the Daley style, stealing and bullying and rarely bothering to hide it.

When he wasn't greasing the machine, Borchers was spouting noxious twaddle. In the Illinois House, he peppered his thoughts with sexual references, and once claimed that "differences in earwax" proved that whites and Blacks were "two different species."

But this, he thought, looking at the anonymous diary, *is over the line.*

Thursday, November 16, 1972

The Decatur Public Library was a former Sears department store, and the interior was mostly brown and purple—a kind of visual *slump*. But a few minutes into the board of directors meeting, Webber Borchers had everyone perked up and paying attention.

"This book," said Borchers, holding the seized copy of *Alice*, "should not be on the shelves of this library." Borchers had brought some like-minded parents, and they nodded along.

Head librarian Robert Dumas tried to stay calm. This was 1972, and a government official was demanding a book's removal. Not restriction, but *removal*.

Dumas gave a level response. "*Go Ask Alice*," he said, "has received numerous good reviews and recommendations, and was the American Library Association's Best Book of the Year."

Borchers wasn't buying. "This," he said, waggling the book once more, "is part of the problem with our young people."

After some back-and-forth, the library board voted to keep *Alice* in circulation. Webber Borchers, not accustomed to losing, elevated the conflict. At a city council meeting ten days later, he gave a long reading of the book's filthiest sections.

"Another day, another blowjob . . ."

• • •

Borchers's crusade drew praise from many quarters, and for all the expected reasons: *traditional values, these kids and their weird clothing, what's with all the blowjobs?,* etc. One vote of support came from a local anti-pornography activist, who declaimed in the *Decatur Herald*:

> Hurray for Webber Borchers for the courage to bring this vulgar and lewd book to the open, then to continue the pursuit after the head librarian defended such a degrading document.
>
> The mothers who defend these things must be made responsible for the resultant degrading and demoralization of our society.
>
> These ultra-modern, permissive mothers who do not want their children to miss anything, and who dress them in such a provocative manner, are degrading our entire beautiful country.
>
> *Go Ask Alice* should be outlawed, the librarian should be discharged, and the mothers who support *Go Ask Alice* should be ordered into church.
>
> Our permissive parents (especially mothers) who do not want to say 'no' to anything are dragging a once pure country into a low, filthy, diseased sexual gutter, where public acts of sex will be their final achievement.
>
> Mr. Borchers, keep up the good work.

It was the old double standard: *Bring on the violence, but please, no cursing.* (Or as Borchers put it, "The ending, where she dies, is good, but the scenes regarding sex are too vivid.") Virtually no one argued with the truth of *Go Ask Alice*, only the language.

Librarians welcomed this fight, or at least gave it due weight. They knew that book-banners were relentless. If you gave them *X*, they wanted *Y*. After *Y*, they came for *Z*. It would never stop. You had to beat them every time, or else they'd take it all.

But the blowjobs! screamed parents. *The fucks and shits and maggots and rape!*

They weren't wrong, exactly. *Alice* was filthy, with fuel for a million awkward questions, to say nothing of worm-filled nightmares. But maybe that was the point.

Maybe, went one line of thought, *this is what kids need to see: the worst possible outcome of drugs and addiction. Something that puts it all out there, disgusting or not.*

God knew nothing else was working. Between fall of 1971 and spring of 1972, drug use among teens had surged again; by some estimates, more than one third of high schoolers had used an illegal drug. And it wasn't just pot: the numbers were up for alcohol, cocaine, LSD, even heroin. And for every teen who stopped using drugs, as many as four had started.

So maybe a dirty book wasn't so bad, all things considered.

• • •

In Decatur, the city council deliberated for three months, then finally decided. *Go Ask Alice* would stay in libraries, but as an "adult" book. No one under fourteen would be allowed to read it or borrow it, even *with* a parent's permission, a policy that managed to oppress virtually everyone.

Other towns went the same route, restricting access to a book that, according to dozens of critics, "every teen and parent should read."

It was a marketer's wet dream. *Alice* was vile and vital. Immoral and important. *Alice* was grubby, and sleazy, and might save your life.

The debate fueled sales, the sales fueled press, and the press just kept on rolling. Within eighteen months of its original review, the *New York Times* had published three more pieces on *Alice*. One compared it to Margery Williams's *The Velveteen Rabbit* and Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*.

By early 1973, sales were nearing two million, and factories couldn’t keep up. Avon Books, who held the paperback rights, had already gone through seven additional printings, and still, *Alice* was sold out everywhere.

Librarians had battled to keep *Alice* available, and now faced a different problem: theft. At libraries all over America, copies went out and never came back. What was a three-dollar fine for a book you couldn’t buy anywhere?

Soon, there was another option, as *Alice* became America’s favorite kind of book: the kind you could *watch*.

Dead Girl Superstar

Everybody knows it's fake."

Most people weren't so blunt, but Ellen Violett had heard the whispers. They were all over Hollywood.

"Art Linkletter paid to have it done."

Violett heard *that one* a lot.

Still, when ABC approached Violett about scripting a *Go Ask Alice* TV movie, she said yes. It was a job, and you couldn't take those for granted in Hollywood, not ever. She was a woman, which paid no dividends; men were always waiting for you to screw up, or slack off, or have a baby. Then they'd lock the doors again. It was the early 1970s, and Ellen Violett—ambitious, gruff, gay—had no real protection. Not from the courts and not from the culture. The only thing that kept her working was *work*.

Two decades earlier, Violett, then a midtwenties playwright from New York, had bluffed her way into television by adapting Shirley Jackson's murderous fable, "The Lottery," for NBC. (This was doubly impressive given that Violett didn't actually own a television.)

By 1972, Violett was a top-tier writer with two dozen credits and an Emmy nomination. She lost the Emmy but stayed in demand, especially for adaptations.

• • •

Before starting on the script, Violett read *Go Ask Alice* several times, making notes and jotting down ideas. It was all about through-line: What did the characters want? How did they plan to get there? What was stopping them?

As she read, Violett felt a curious resonance. Maybe it *was* fake (no one working on the movie had met Alice's parents, and some of the twists were far-fetched), but still, there was something familiar about this girl. Violett understood her. It was all those live-wire emotions—the strange, powerful hungers and crippling isolation. The diary as confidant.

If this is fake, thought Violett, *it's not entirely fake. There's some reality in here. This was somebody's lifeline.*

For Violett, the parallels were clear. She remembered her first gay relationship, the joyous realization that it was *fun*. No misery, no hellfire, just pleasure. (She'd been right all along!)

Of course, later, when the first breakup came, Violett was on her own. There was no one to talk with, except maybe a shrink or a priest.

Writing had saved her. Pointed her toward a life and a future. Given her a place for all the chaos inside.

It was the same with Alice, who'd plunged into the forbidden and found it wonderful and seductive, if a little frightening. When things collapsed, Alice found comfort in the diary, the one place she could truly be herself. When all else failed, she could still write.

That was enough for Violett. Whatever doubts lingered, she pushed them aside and went to work. *It's real,* she told herself. *It's real.*

That was the only way to make it sing. Others could afford to doubt, but Ellen Violett had to believe.

• • •

Viewed a half-century later, the TV movie of *Go Ask Alice* stands out mainly for what it's *not*: all that bad.

Even with a quality script, there were pitfalls aplenty, beginning with the cast. William Shatner? Andy Griffith? What was this, an episode of *Mannix*?

As with the book, it all came down to Alice, the girl who would win your heart, then break it. If you rooted for her, nothing else would matter; if you didn't, nothing else would work.

At twenty-four, Jamie Smith Jackson was long out of high school. Fortunately, television casting was somewhat . . . elastic. More importantly, Jackson had *presence*, and exuded a quiet, echoing hurt. Most small-screen actors went big, exaggerating their movements and speech; Jackson went smaller and softer, letting you sense her inner reactions.

Even William Shatner, just three years gone from *Star Trek*, responded to Jackson's talent, ditching his hard inflections and angular cadence. As Alice's father, Shatner was sympathetic and completely believable—a man losing his daughter to unseen forces.

For Alice's first LSD trip, convention dictated swirling lights and fuzzy noise, maybe a sitar. Instead, director John Korty played it straight, letting Jackson's delicate facial expressions do the work.

From there, the brief seventy-six-minute movie hurtled toward darkness: the dealing, the running away, the street life and turning of tricks. Andy Griffith, rustic wisdom incarnate, made the most of his nine minutes on-screen, playing the blue-collar preacher who convinces Alice to go back home.

A streetwise San Francisco priest (Andy Griffith, left) shelters a distraught Alice (Jamie Jackson, right) in ABC Television's 1973 adaptation of Go Ask Alice *(Courtesy of ABC Television).*

"The thing that makes you different from a lot of the others," he says, holding Alice's battered diary, "is this. Be sure to get another one of these when you get home. You might as well stay hooked on your good habits."

The biggest change came with Alice's final, traumatic meltdown—the one that lands her in a psych ward, bandaged and bleeding. In 1973, the book's revolting, casket-filled climax was simply unfilmable, and Ellen Violett's script bypassed the whole thing, jumping ahead to a woozy, bedraggled Alice recovering in lockup.

The finish is tidy and plays out in minutes: Alice learns that her old druggie pals dosed her, realizes she has to change to survive, and vows to get clean and live right.

Moments later, we see her heading up the steps of her high school, determined to make the most of this second chance. She pauses, looks back at us, and the action freezes.

Alice's mother gives the closing narration:

> In the fall of her last year in high school, our daughter died of an overdose of drugs. We were never able to find out what the drugs were, or whether or not they were self-administered. Since she had stopped keeping a diary several months before, we had no clues as to why she died. We *have* discovered since then that she was one of almost five thousand drug deaths that year, and so we decided to make her diary public because . . . we feel she would have wanted us to.

Action resumes, a generic version of "White Rabbit" fades in, and Alice vanishes into the crowd of students.

Credits roll.

• • •

Even before it aired, *Alice* garnered acclaim from the press, a result of ABC's heavy promotion. Across the country, critics viewed an early screening, then all but demanded that families watch it together.

"Every youngster in this area, along with his parents, should [watch] *Go Ask Alice*," said the *Cincinnati Enquirer*'s Steve Hoffman. "It should be mandatory viewing for school teachers, too—and they, in turn, should remind students to watch it, if necessary at the expense of homework."*

"Occasionally," wrote Kay Gardella of the *New York Daily News*, "a television film comes along that has something so agonizingly true to say in the context of today's increasingly complicated world that a critic feels compelled to recommend it. One such film is *Go Ask Alice* . . . for today's concerned parents and young people alike, this film is not to be missed."

In St. Louis, Pete Rahn of the *Globe-Democrat* called *Alice* "the finest anti-drug drama ever presented by television," adding, "Encourage those youngsters to watch."

• • •

On Wednesday, January 24, 1973, nearly one-third of all US households viewed ABC's adaptation of *Go Ask Alice*, making it the week's highest-rated TV movie.*

For months to come, and with every rebroadcast, calls and letters poured into ABC. One Seattle mother wrote, "Until tonight, I felt my son was unapproachable on the subject of drugs. After the movie we talked for two hours." All over the nation, groups asked to screen *Alice* at drug-abuse workshops.

Emmy voters took notice, and nominated Ellen M. Violett for Best Adapted Dramatic Script (she lost to Eleanor Perry's adaptation of *The House Without a Christmas Tree*).

Even Alice's personal Gomorrah, San Francisco, embraced the movie, awarding *Go Ask Alice* the first Special Jury Award at the San Francisco International Film Festival.

For the next several years, *Go Ask Alice* aired on a regular basis, ensuring steady promotion for the paperback. By the end of 1973, sales were well past two million with no slowdown in sight.

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* Hoffman himself seemed a bit foggy on the drug topic, noting that *Go Ask Alice* showed "how one typical youngster gets her start on LSD, and gradually moves into the more serious grass, heroin, and acid."

* True, there were only three networks to choose from (four, if you counted PBS), but broadcasters don't care *why* you watch, only *if* you watch.

Nameless, Faceless

In Provo, Beatrice Sparks watched it all happen, just another outsider.

Two years earlier, when she agreed to take her name off *Go Ask Alice*, who could have imagined all this? The countless headlines. The astonishing sales. An Emmy-nominated movie.

If she'd stuck to her guns, the attention—the *recognition*—would have been staggering, the kind of fame that eludes all but a handful of writers.

Instead, she was anonymous. (Or "Anonymous.")

It was (almost) funny.

Even on her home turf, Sparks was overlooked. The *Daily Herald*, which had tracked Beatrice and LaVorn's social climb, praised the TV movie, gushing for seven paragraphs about its "powerful, heart-rending public service." But no mention of Sparks, who lived just three miles from the *Herald*'s office.

And she was stuck. If she made trouble, it might kill the book's momentum. Worse, it might rankle her agent, or her publisher, or both. Her career could vaporize in one angry second. Sparks was fifty-six. It was no time to start burning bridges.

So she sat there, watching Anonymous take the credit. Or in the case of the movie, some writer from Hollywood: "Teleplay by ELLEN M. VIOLETT, Based on the Book GO ASK ALICE, Published by PRENTICE-HALL, INC."

It was like a Greek punishment. Fame without fame.

After thirty years of trying, Beatrice Sparks had changed the world.

And nobody knew it.

Meanwhile

In a ranch house nine miles north of Provo, a mother of six held on to a journal.

It was green, spiral-bound, and covered with sixties jargon: *groovy, keen, outta sight.*

The inside was darker, and sadder, but still, she read it sometimes. To remember.

There is a reason, she thought. *There has to be.*

Part Two

The Boy Who Died

Problem Child

Summer 1958

They are best friends, the dog and her boy.

Duchess, a German shepherd puppy, is all soft edges and oversize paws.

Alden Barrett, three years old, has dark brown hair with eyes to match, and a knack for finding trouble. His parents aren't neglectful, but Alden, as they say, is a handful. Blink and he's gone, seeking adventure and/or disaster.

At this moment, Alden is crossing the yard, tottering toward the street. As he nears the sidewalk, Duchess takes hold of his bib overalls and tugs him back toward the lawn. Once released, Alden resumes his forward march, and Duchess repeats the action, this time pulling Alden down onto his backside. Alden tries to stand up, but Duchess is having none of it, and keeps him tethered to the lawn.

Alden, his merriment thwarted, scowls. "You dumb dog!" he shouts.

By now, the family has appeared, and Duchess lets go. She licks Alden's face, and he giggles.

Fall 1959

Alden Barrett is five, and a few older children are teasing and prodding, trying to make him cry. It's not difficult—Alden often seems on the brink of tears (or laughter).

This time, the kids aren't getting the reaction they want, so they start closing in. Duchess, sitting nearby, watches for a few moments, then ambles over. She doesn't growl or snap, but gently slides herself between Alden and the others. The message is clear: *Time to stop.*

It's a pattern. Alden veers toward danger, only to be rescued at the last moment. Tricky enough when the dangers are visible. When they come from inside, there's little anyone can do.

Fall 1960

Alden Barrett is six. He is sobbing, his whole body shaking in a hot, stricken rage. His stomach aches, but still, he can't stop crying. He pulls at his own hair, hands clenched tight, like he's trying to tear it out. His eyes are clamped shut, but the tears keep coming.

Alden is a difficult, frustrating child. His mood is like a cheap thermostat, switching back and forth.

He also bursts with questions, about everything, all the time. It's fun for a while, then turns annoying. Sometimes his older siblings lie to him. The lies are punishment, a way to annoy him back. Alden will ask about a song on the radio, and his siblings will give a nonsense answer, something he *knows* is wrong. He'll ask again, and they'll say more nonsense, repeating the ploy until Alden throws a tantrum. It's a mean thing to do, but sometimes they can't help it. Alden can be a pain in the ass. It's his emotions: he can't control them. Instead, they yank him around, leaving him anxious and weary.

Saturday, March 13, 1971

Alden Barrett is sixteen years old.

Outside, a flat gray sky drenches everything.

Alden is downstairs, locked behind a bedroom door. He's shouting at someone on the telephone. There's a muffled clang, and when Alden emerges, his face is wet. His eyes are frantic and bloodshot. He looks like a trapped, injured animal.

The house is mostly empty, just Alden and his two younger siblings, plus a neighbor girl. Alden is frazzled, snapping at everyone, not really listening.

He tells the kids to feed Pete, the family's new German shepherd. Duchess, Alden's lifelong guardian, died a few weeks earlier, put down because of cancer.

Alden is exhausted, tired of life and all its disappointments. He's tired of school, of his family, of living in Pleasant Grove. It's a treadmill town, just training you for more of the same. Alden wants out. *Anywhere. Anywhere but here.*

The rain pelts the windows.

Alden feels sick, and sad, and lonely. His thoughts are like black screws, turning deeper and deeper, ruining everything good. He can't stop them.

His parents have done their best. Friends and teachers have intervened, trying everything they can think of. Just last night, Alden and a close friend stayed up late, talking faith and belief and the strength to endure.

But Alden doesn't have faith. Not anymore. "God, you bastard," he writes in a green spiral notebook, "why me?"

Like nearly everyone in Pleasant Grove, Alden's parents are Mormon, but they're also pragmatic. They've sought medication, therapy—anything that might help their son. But it's 1971, and psychiatry, especially for young people, is still on training wheels. The first real study of teenage mental health is only a few months old.

The rain keeps pouring.

Alden's father has a pistol. Small and silver, .22 caliber. He keeps it locked up, but not well enough.

Alden is crying again.

He sends the children to their rooms.

The Happiest Days of Our Lives

Alden's parents, Doyle and Marcella Barrett, had met at Brigham Young University. Marcella's first husband had died in a car wreck, and she was raising three kids while putting herself through college. She hadn't expected to marry again, but Doyle was a gift, and things fell into place.

The Barrett family home under construction, circa 1960 (Courtesy of Utah County Recorder's Office).

Even remarried, Marcella pushed herself. Doyle was pre-med, and that took money, so Marcella ran a day care and rented out a spare bedroom, all while raising the children, who soon numbered six: three from her first marriage, and three with Doyle. Alden arrived in 1954, Scott in 1959, and Elaine in 1961.

Eight-year-old Alden Barrett (right) picks flowers with little brother Scott, 1962 (Courtesy of Scott Barrett).

From the start, Alden was a wild card, sweet and funny one moment, withdrawn or sobbing the next. He couldn't make it stop, even when the tears knotted his insides and choked off his breathing.

By age twelve, he seemed to be leveling off. *Maybe*, his parents hoped, *it's some kind of reverse puberty—the cranky child becomes a settled young man.*

At school, Alden latched onto science, tutoring older kids and talking about a career in medicine. Doyle, by then the chief of staff at nearby American Fork Hospital, glowed at the idea of Alden following in his footsteps.

For Alden Barrett, the draw of science was twofold. There was wonder—the bright, sharp rush of discovery—and there was *order*. Chemistry was precise, provable, and consistent. It was, in short, the opposite of religion.

Pleasant Grove was just down the road from Provo, and had the same demographics: White and Mormon, Mormon and White. The only real

difference was size. Provo had forty-four thousand people, and Pleasant Grove hovered at five thousand.

Pleasant Grove, Utah. To the east, the Wasatch Mountain Range fills the horizon (Photo by Don LaVange).

Since early childhood, Alden's life had followed the tick-tock of Mormon routine, a structure that increased with age.

Each weekday, teens attended seminary, an hour-long class on scripture and Church history. Monday was Family Home Evening, a night of parent/child religious instruction and wholesome entertainment. Tuesday nights were for Mutual (short for "Mutual Improvement Association") meetings, which taught young men and women—usually in separate classes—about spiritual strength and preserving their virtue.

The Church had a long-standing partnership with the Boy Scouts of America, so most young Mormons were also Scouts, which meant an additional weekly meeting.

Fridays and Saturdays were all about housework, finishing errands and leftover chores. (The Church even had a song on this subject. Sample lyrics: "Saturday is a special day / It's the day we get ready for Sunday / We brush our clothes, and we shine our shoes / And we call it our get-the-work-done day.")

Sundays were a marathon: up at 7:00 AM for a priesthood meeting (a male-only spiritual lesson, grouped by age), then home to gather the rest of the family and return to church for Sunday School, an immersive, single-topic sermon that ran until noon or so. Then back home again, but only for a few hours; then back to church for Sacrament Meeting—a ninety-minute service featuring prayers, hymns, personal testimonies, and the sharing of consecrated bread and water.*

On many Sunday evenings, teens attended a fireside: another ninety-minute lecture, usually on a specific subject. Sexual purity, for instance, or the need to follow authority.

Female Saints had their own assigned meetings and organizations, plus *ad hoc* duties galore (e.g., getting a houseful of children bathed, fed, and ready for church while fathers and older boys went off to priesthood meetings).

Monday morning, it all started over again.

In addition to the above (and more), you had to go to school every day. And get into college. And go on a mission. And pick the right spouse. And get the right job. And raise your children to be "noble and useful citizens of the state and of the Church." And never, ever wonder why you felt so drained and exhausted.

• • •

For boys and girls alike, turning twelve in the Mormon Church meant the beginning of another ritual: the worthiness interview.

Awkward by any standard, the worthiness interview was like Catholic confession by way of an HR grilling.

Your local bishop, a pink-faced man with too many teeth, calls you into his office, a nice, slightly sterile room with plenty of light. He smiles and thanks you for coming, then starts with the questions.

Some are basic, designed to weed out laggards:

"Do you have faith in and a testimony of God the Eternal Father, His Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost?"

(Translation: *Do you believe in God?*)

“Do you have a testimony of the restoration of the gospel in these, the latter days?”

(Translation: *Do you believe in* our *God?*)

Some carry the whisper of blacklist:

“Do you support, affiliate with, or agree with any group or individual whose teachings or practices are contrary to or oppose those accepted by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?”

(Translation: *Are you going to cause trouble?*)

There are questions about money (“Are you in debt? If so, to whom? Do you tithe at least 10 percent of your income to the Church?”), and questions about diet (“Do you keep the Word of Wisdom, avoiding coffee, tea, liquor, etc.?”).

Then come the *other* questions. The kind that only cops and clerics can ask without getting smacked.

“Have you ever committed murder?”

“Have you ever committed a homosexual act?”

“Have you ever engaged in bestiality?”

“Do you masturbate?”

Some of these questions come later, prior to marriage, or before serving a mission. But bishops have broad authority in what they ask and how they ask it. They might push for graphic details or provide their own seamy examples. Stories abound of long, awkward sessions filled with seemingly pointless detours. *Did you touch yourself? What were you thinking of when you touched yourself? Did you orgasm? Were you wearing immodest underwear?*

If you give the wrong answers (or you’re too embarrassed to reply), they can bar you from the temple. And if you stop attending temple rites, your friends and family will have a hunch as to why. After all, they went through the same degrading process.

Worthiness interviews begin at age twelve and happen every two years. More frequently if the bishop deems it necessary. As long as you remain an active Church member, the interviews continue.

• • •

Growing up, Alden had his own questions, about music, and animals, and what made the clouds move. It was cute, if sometimes wearing. As he entered adolescence, however, the questions grew sharper.

Do you really believe the Church is true? Why? How do you know?

Why can't Black men join the priesthood?

Why can't women join the priesthood?

Those questions weren't cute or funny. They embarrassed people or made them angry. The standard responses ("I just do," or "It's Heavenly Father's will," or sometimes "What's gotten into you?") all meant the same thing: *Don't ask that.*

To occupy his ever-buzzing brain, Alden found diversions: drama club, debate club, and books by the stack. Rock music blaring from his bedroom radio.

Debate was the real lifesaver. In debate, you had to *prove* it, or at least make a convincing case. You couldn't just point at the sky and say, "God did it."

Even better, debate required you to argue both sides of an issue, no matter your own beliefs. Gun control, yes or no? Affirmative action, good or bad? The Vietnam War, fight or fold? A few minutes before the match, they'd assign you a position, and then it was time. If you didn't go all out, the other debater would whip you senseless in front of a crowd. The process made you smarter; it taught you to think. And the more you did it, the more you saw the holes in *everything*.

The PGHS 1969–1970 debate team (led by instructor Carol Anderson, left) wraps a season of eight wins and two losses. The following year, Alden Barrett (right) would become team president (Courtesy of Pleasant Grove High School).

Alden's growing skepticism didn't go over so well with his parents, and especially not with Doyle, an old-school social conservative.

"Alden's problems at home were common knowledge," says Carol Anderson, Alden's sophomore-year debate instructor. "He was a typical high school student in that he had problems with his family, but in Alden's case . . . it was a *war* at home. With his father in particular. It was a war."

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* Mormon men twelve and older were expected to join the priesthood (an all-purpose term for Church-related work). This didn't apply to Black men, who—like women—could join the Church but were barred from the priesthood. The rule against Black priests was lifted in 1978; the ban on female priests remains.

The Home Front

Like countless young Americans, Alden loathed both Nixon and his party—an unpopular view in Pleasant Grove, where patriotism was nearly its own religion.

It was a stark turnaround for Mormon culture, which had literally *battled* against the government a century earlier, part of a long fight over polygamy. Facing eradication, the Church had finally renounced "plural marriage" for a chance at mainstream power. By the 1960s, the wild-eyed speeches and underage harems were (mostly) gone, replaced by a vague, loyalist fervor. Like Ronald Reagan a decade later, Mormons were long on flags and short on specifics, and the exceptions were always negative: No on gambling, No on gay rights, No on the ERA.

Alden Barrett, barely fifteen, had his own fervors, and his own specifics. Nixon? Bullshit. Vietnam? Monstrous bullshit. The Church? Well, its leaders supported both Nixon *and* the war, so you do the math.

A young man with a young man's certitude, Alden could be terse and obnoxious, dismissing people and their views as stupid or backward. Fights with his father got ugly. Doyle was progressive on certain issues, like medicine and mental health, but a hard right-winger on everything else. To Doyle, the hippies and Yippies were just spoiled brats. All that "kill your parents" crap that the radicals spouted—it was infantile nonsense.

Marcella would sometimes intervene, trying to calm things down. Alden would give her an earful: *What do you know? You're in the John Birch*

Society. Then the shouting would start. Eventually, Alden would storm out or get sent to his room, where he'd stew.

Even if he won the arguments, it didn't make a difference. He was fifteen, so he was stuck in Pleasant Grove. But there were temporary escapes.

Since entering high school, Alden had stayed on the straight, but starting in 1969, he got fucked up on a regular basis, usually with a few close friends. Pot, acid, downers, speed—whatever was available. It made his brain feel different, which was good, or shut things off entirely, which was better.

His grades began to slip. Alden had always been able to coast, but now, he simply stopped caring. Sometimes he went to class; sometimes he didn't. When he went, he just heard establishment prattle, the party line from party hacks. America the Beautiful, ready to send him to the slaughter overseas.

His clothes got ratty and wrinkled: patched-up jeans and rumpled shirts. *You could look so handsome,* his mother, Marcella, would tell him, *but your clothes . . .*

Doyle Barrett was blunter. *You look like a hobo. Is that what you want?*

Worst of all was Alden's hair. In 1969, long hair on men was no joke; it could bring a beating or worse. In *Easy Rider*, it got Dennis Hopper blown to bits by a shotgun.

By sixties standards, Alden's hair was modest—barely at his collar—but Utah County was another world, with "sir" and "ma'am," and frozen *Archie* smiles. And long hair wasn't just different, it was *defiant*, and that was far worse.

What about Jesus? He had long hair.

That's different, Alden, and you know it.

Why?

It just is.

What about Brigham Young? He had—

Alden Niel Barrett!

Then he'd stop. For a while.

As Alden's hair grew, his parents' anger deepened. They would tell him to cut it, and he would ignore them. They'd tell him again, and Alden would pick a fight about religion or Nixon, and that would derail things for several hours.

Alden's older siblings piled on.*

Cut your hair.

No.

Cut your hair.

No.

One night, two of the older kids finally had enough. Waiting for Alden inside the front door, they grabbed him, pinned him to the floor, and got a pair of scissors. As one held Alden in place, the other went to work, cutting Alden's hair in big, jagged whacks. Alden cursed and fought, and soon his scalp was bleeding. At last, he broke free, ran for the door, and vanished.

When he returned, he was seething and bent on revenge. Marcella—who had okayed the forced haircut—ordered a full-house truce.

The next morning, she took Alden to the barber. There was no fixing the damage, and before Alden could protest, the barber took everything off, leaving only a short buzz. For Alden, a high schooler and would-be hippie, it was a nightmare.

"Eventually," said Marcella decades later, "I came to my senses and wasn't so frightened and realized that this trend was going to be with us. We had to rethink a few things and not be so uptight about our kids."

At the time, however, Doyle and Marcella just wanted Alden to conform. That was how society worked, and everyone had to learn it.

"I didn't want to see his beautiful hair nicked up like that," Marcella later recalled, "but I didn't want it long. I wanted it cut the normal way that was normal for our town, and he refused to do that."

Around the time of the hair-cutting debacle, some pills went missing from Doyle's home office. When he asked Alden about it, Alden got indignant. *Stealing from you? What kind of lowlife do you think I am?*

Given Alden's glassy demeanor and plummeting grades, it wasn't very convincing, and the lingering suspicion only increased the tension.

When, midway through some other argument, Alden pulled the "school is a dictatorship, and so is this family" card, Doyle and Marcella finally snapped. Alden was going to obey, whatever it took.

They emptied his bedroom, moving everything—books, clothes, records, chairs, the bed itself—into the hallway. All that remained was the carpet and overhead light.

Doyle ordered Alden into the bedroom and made him strip to his underwear. Marcella took the clothing, then returned with a pillow and blanket. Doyle tossed the bedding to Alden, yanked the door shut, then went to find a dog chain. Soon, the doorknob was lashed to a nearby sink, meaning the bedroom door couldn't be opened from the inside.

Doyle and Marcella slid a pencil and paper under the door.

You need to set some structured goals, they told him. *And you need to understand what got you here. When you've done that, maybe you can have your things back. Maybe you can get dressed and rejoin the family. Until then . . .*

Until then, Alden would sit in the empty bedroom, alone, almost naked, enraged and embarrassed. He had to ask permission to take a piss or get a drink of water. His meals came through the barely opened door, and when he was done, the dishes went out the same way.

He eventually scribbled a few sentences and shoved the paper under the door.

> I started saying things without thinking. I said school and family rules are set up like a dictatorship. This is not so because opinions and suggestions can be freely expressed if done so in the proper manner.

Further down, he couldn't resist a little bite:

> What is actually wrong is trying to justify the actions of people I love.

Then, at the bottom, in a shakier hand:

> I still have to work at staying straight. It doesn't come naturally yet.

Next, they wanted a list of things—personal traits—that needed fixing. Alden sent back a full page.

> What faults do I have that need eliminating?

> I am not happy with myself because—
>
> 1. I am conceited.
> 2. Disrespectful
> 3. A liar
> 4. I give in to temptation of temporary pleasure
> 5. Too individualistic
> 6. I procrastinate
> 7. I'm lazy

It went on and on.

> I'm wasteful . . . unorganized . . . self-centered . . . rebellious . . .

He slid the paper out. A mostly blank page came back. At the top, it said, "This is an outline only." They wanted introspection, or at least some detail.

He tried again.

> Why am I—
>
> 1. Conceited—Because I tend to be selfish, and let my life revolve around myself.
> 2. Disrespectful—Because I ignore the love and trust given to me by people I should respect.

He filled several pages, explaining nearly two dozen personal failings.

After three days of back-and-forth, Doyle and Marcella relented. The chain came off the door, and Alden got his things back.

• • •

When Alden's friends learned about the lockup, they were shocked and angry. Fifty years later, Tim McCaffery—one of Alden's fellow hell-raisers—practically spits when thinking about the forced confinement.

"When you shave a kid's head, and strip him to his boxers, and put a chain on his door," says McCaffery, "that's abuse."

In normal conversation, McCaffery speaks with hard-guy bravado—the residual swagger of long-ago youth. When discussing Alden's home life, however, the machismo vanishes, replaced by angry bewilderment.

"That family," says McCaffery with a harsh, bitter laugh. "I think Alden was the only sane one."

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* Technically, they were half siblings from Marcella's first marriage.

Somebody Save Me

The bedroom detention might have seemed outrageous, but things weren't so clear-cut. Alden *had* been stealing pills from his father's office, stuffing his pockets with uppers (mostly Dexedrine), downers (mostly Seconal), and whatever else was handy. He'd call up some friends, and they'd gather in someone's basement, where Alden would dump everything out. Hours later, he'd stagger home, doing his best to seem level.

Doyle and Marcella saw Alden heading for disaster, and were desperate to stop it. There was always jail, but calling the cops was a final resort—what you did when everything else had failed.

That was another problem. When it came to mental health, especially for teens, "everything else" was a pretty short list.

Doyle knew that better than most. As early as 1961, he'd given lectures on mental health, trying to lessen the stigma. "One in ten Americans," he pointed out, "will, at some point in their lives, be subject to some type of mental illness."

People found that overblown because they weren't really listening. He wasn't saying ten percent of people were *crazy*, but that brain health was just another kind of physical health. If you caught a cold, or broke a bone, you eventually recovered. Why was mental health any different? Most people got depressed or anxious at some point, but it usually passed. Yes, some issues were crippling, and some were incurable, but so were a lot of physical ailments. That was no reason to give up on treatment, and it was no reason to shun the afflicted.

But treatment was easier said than found. Doyle and Marcella had been trying to get a psychiatrist for Alden, but options were scarce. True, the state mental hospital was just down the road in Provo, but that was deceptive. Opened in 1885 as the Territorial Insane Asylum, the hospital initially served to keep the “mentally feeble” away from normal society, and was separated from town by a half mile of swamps, sewage-filled marshes, and (in case the point wasn’t clear) the city dump. Seven decades later, the hospital was little more than an overstuffed cage, with fifteen hundred patients in a space meant for three hundred.

By 1969, things had improved, but treatment was still mired in guesswork. There was never enough money for research, and when clinical theories *did* emerge, they were hard to test. Unlike a busted leg, depression couldn’t be x-rayed. For that matter, how did you know when someone was faking? Or when they were cured?

What breakthroughs came were typically for grown-ups. Young children had a hard time sitting still, much less explaining their symptoms. Teenagers, meanwhile, were human kaleidoscopes: shifting arrays of complex, sometimes baffling features.

So the focus on adults was understandable. It was also a slow-motion disaster.

When, after decades of exclusion, scientists finally examined the teenage brain, they found shocking rates of major-depressive disorders and persistent-depressive disorders. These weren’t mood swings or “off days,” but serious ailments closely linked to suicide, and nearly all were more common in teens than in grown-ups. The frightening peak came at age seventeen, when clinical depression rates hit 19 percent, and suicide surged as a cause of death.

But true understanding was years away, and progress would come at a glacier’s pace.

• • •

In the absence of real, clinical treatment, Doyle and Marcella sent Alden to an outdoor “survival program” run by a BYU instructor. Part detox, part

get-your-shit-together-and-find-some-firewood boot camp, the program was popular with local judges, who sentenced troublemakers to a few weeks in the forest. Doyle wanted a true rehab, but those barely existed for adults, let alone teenagers.

The outdoor program worked, but only in the short term. After repeated relapses, Alden asked his parents to send him to Wasatch Academy, an ultra-strict school in Sanpete County, seventy miles from Pleasant Grove.

At Wasatch Academy, a barrage of bells woke you for breakfast, and if you weren't in the cafeteria by 7:00 AM, you got demerits. After breakfast, you did assigned chores, then went to the chapel for service, followed by schoolwork. At 6:00 PM, everyone went to dinner, then to study hall. Lights-out came at 10:00 PM, no exceptions. At meals, boys had to wear either a jacket or a sweater/tie combo.

The school's rigid approach was misleading. Wasatch Academy emphasized individual education, and kept class sizes small, averaging one teacher for every ten students. Many of the teachers were PhDs, and nearly all had years of training in their given fields.

The results were impressive: more than 90 percent of Wasatch graduates went on to a four-year college, and a significant number enrolled in the Ivy League. For a student bored by public schooling, Wasatch Academy could be a sanctuary—a place where tough thinking was welcomed, even rewarded.

Alden Barrett—his dark hair colored red for a school play—at Wasatch Academy, 1970 (Courtesy of Wasatch Academy).

It also gave a glimpse of life outside the Mormon bubble.

Two years earlier, the Beatles had gone to India for a three-month course in Transcendental Meditation, and though they'd lasted only a few weeks, the trip had a global impact, introducing millions of Westerners to words like *yoga* and *mantra*. Guitarist George Harrison came home a convert and stayed one for life, punctuating his conversations (and even his angry outbursts) with "Hare Krishna."

At Wasatch Academy, Alden met kids who meditated or who dabbled in Eastern and new-age religions. Even a teacher (a guitar instructor, of course) got in on the act, expounding on auras, astral projection, and the ill-defined power of "metaphysics."

With the earnest zeal of youth, a handful of Academy students, including Alden, formed a group called KARMA, and held long, intense discussions about existence and the inner self. On occasion, someone would bring out a Ouija board, and the boys would take turns asking it questions. Alden, one friend later recalled, found the Ouija board "hokey as hell," and

preferred to talk about dream symbolism. Then they'd all sneak outside to get hammered or high before creeping back to their dorm rooms.

When the school year ended, Alden returned to Pleasant Grove, not quite clean, not quite sober, and talking about his *mantra*. Worse, his complaints about the Church—particularly its treatment of Black members—were louder and angrier than before.

Doyle was beyond exasperated and put his foot down: Alden was *not* going back to Wasatch Academy.

For Alden, this was the last straw. He'd already had enough of Utah; now even his new school was off-limits.

He was almost sixteen. In two years, Nixon would probably ship him to Vietnam. Why waste the little time he had left?

Fuck this place.

In June 1970, he packed a few things, got a one-way bus ticket, and disappeared.

Coming Down Fast

In 1934, a teenaged Beatrice Sparks arrived in San Francisco from the outskirts of northern Utah. Almost four decades later, Alden Barrett made a similar trip, hitching and busing his way from Pleasant Grove to California's East Bay.

What he found was disappointing: a city of grime and glitter, with little in between. The weather was gray, even in the summer; at night, a damp chill clung to everything. And the people of San Francisco no longer found vagrants charming, if they ever had.

After sunset, police roamed the parks, writing tickets for illegal occupancy and shooing teens toward homeless shelters. Those who stayed on the streets faced an array of moonlight dangers, often at the hands of fellow drifters. Quests for enlightenment went by the wayside, replaced by more prosaic issues, like *Where am I going to sleep tonight?* Kids expecting Aquarius wound up hustling for crumpled dollars.

A week after arriving in San Francisco, Alden was sleeping in doorways, which put the vagabond life into perspective. He finally landed at Huckleberry House, a hostel for runaway teens in the Haight.

Running away from home, whatever the reason, was a crime in 1970, and so was harboring a runaway. A few years earlier, San Francisco cops had staged a midnight raid, arresting Huckleberry's adult staff and sending the kids to a brick-and-barbed-wire jail. To prevent future arrests, Huckleberry's directors found a legal workaround: if a teen was staying overnight, the parents got a phone call saying so. That defused the

“harboring a runaway” charge, and also got kids and parents talking—sometimes.

Told of the notification requirement, Alden agreed, and dialed Pleasant Grove.

When Doyle answered, Alden’s voice rattled down the phone line, asking if he could come home.

His parents made the trip in one push, driving 750 miles to retrieve their wayward son. Before heading back to Utah, the trio shared one gloriously discordant evening in The City, taking in a production of *Hair*.

Back home, Alden was humbled and depressed, angry at his own lapses. He couldn’t get his shit together, couldn’t *keep* it together. Sobriety was like hypnosis: it was easier with something else to focus on. That’s how you relaxed and shut out the demons, or at least ignored them. School didn’t work. Religion didn’t work. Nothing worked. Even if he’d *wanted* to join the military, which he didn’t, that was two years away. How would he last that long?

A few weeks later, the pattern finally broke.

All of My Young Life

August 1970

Alden was nearly sixteen; in less than a month, he'd start his junior year at Pleasant Grove High School. Slowly but surely, he was approaching manhood.

Even better, Doyle and Marcella had found a psychiatrist who accepted teenage patients. Alden went to the sessions without complaint, and that by itself was progress.

So when his parents decided to leave town for a few days—a final chance to enjoy the warm weather—Alden wanted to stay behind. It was a terrible idea, but even at his most exasperating, Alden still could be persuasive. Against their better judgment, Doyle and Marcella left for a week and took the two younger kids with them.

On Monday, August 17, Alden called up some friends, and things got hazy. And loud. And that's when the cops appeared, catching Alden with a bag of grass and a bunch of Seconal capsules.

If the bust had come three months later, it would have been even worse. Nixon's War on Drugs increased the penalties for everything, including possession. As it was, the pills and weed were bad news—the kind of thing you could do real time for, even as a juvenile. Worst of all, Doyle and Marcella were out of town for another few days, so Alden sat in underage lockup, surrounded by dimwits and burnouts, thinking about his future.

Was this what he wanted? To piss away his promise and intellect? Was this his life going forward? Booze and dope and the cold snap of handcuffs?

He thought about his parents, who'd done all they could to help. His father, who'd driven all night to fetch him from a San Francisco shelter. His mother, who worried and prayed for him, hoping he'd find his way.

He thought about his friends, and former friends; people he'd lost or pushed away with his weird, erratic behavior. His current girlfriend, a sophomore named Pamela, would surely drop him when word of the arrest got around. Understandable, really—nobody wanted their daughter spending time with a criminal pothead.

By the time Doyle and Marcella returned, Alden had made a conscious decision.

I am going to change.

• • •

He got off with probation and house arrest. Certain outside activities, like debate and drama, were fine, but no vanishing for hours on end, and no hanging out with his old drug buddies. Everything he did, apart from school and church, had to be approved. And if he fucked up again, he'd go to jail, no debate. (Ha ha.)

On September 5, 1970—one day after turning sixteen—Alden Barrett vowed to stay clean.

He also started a diary.

Somebody to Love

Saturday, September 5, 1970

> I live in a world of filthy air and water, war, revolution (violent and non-violent) (hear, hear) . . . people who are beautiful and real, people who are not so beautiful and not so real; silence and, more often, senseless babble; wondering to what degree I'm sane . . . trying to be liberal in an ultra-conservative atmosphere, extremism. Wishing I could have coffee for breakfast every morning, and wishing my hair was a little longer. Also school, which is really a lot of fun.
>
> —Alden Barrett journal entry

It was a green spiral notebook from the Smith Rexall drugstore. He covered the front with graffiti-style blurbs: "Groovy," "Bitchin," "Outta Sight." On the inside cover, a giant, pop-art "FLASH!"

At first, there was nothing special. Like a lot of teens, Alden wasn't quite sure what to *put* in a journal, so it was mostly chronology: getting up, going to school, and coming home again. There wasn't much else—house arrest saw to that. Still, it was a start.

Over time, he stretched out, adding poetry and drawings—big, sprawling, pen-and-ink designs that filled whole pages. And there was a *lot*

of venting. When his older sister relayed a private conversation to Doyle and Marcella, Alden felt betrayed, and dubbed her “Benedict Arnold II”:

> I really thought she was cool, and had my best interests in mind. What a bunch of B.S. She hates my guts.

Then, a moment later:

> After writing that, I feel a heck of a lot better. That’s what this is for, I guess. To get the hassles out of my system. It would be so cool if we could get along, but they just don’t understand. At any rate, I do feel less hostile, and I suppose that’s constructive.

It wasn’t a cure-all, and Alden Barrett wasn’t a great philosopher. He was a teenager trying to figure things out.

• • •

Within a few days of the arrest, Alden’s girlfriend dumped him. He’d seen it coming and couldn’t really blame her. Still, it stung. Forced separation from two close friends, Mike Waid and John Lundgren, was harder. They were drug pals, which meant they were off-limits until Alden’s probation elapsed. Just as well, maybe. He was trying to stay clean, and together, the three of them always seemed to find trouble.

> I am extremely self-conscious. In the past, I had the help of people who, in some ways, were very similar to me. Unfortunately, this had side effects. Not only were our good points reinforced, but our bad points were reinforced—our vices were fed. All of that is out of my hands now. I am alone.
>
> I am so lonely. I am so tired and so afraid. I am in need . . .

He tried to make the best of it, reading about other places and cultures, and dreaming of a life outside Pleasant Grove. The Beatles had just broken up, coming apart in a flurry of lawsuits, but they'd shown the way to something bigger and bolder. Even John Lennon, who spit nails at everything, was on the peace train, sitting in bed with Yoko and growing his hair to the floor.

Alden read about meditation and tried to make it work, reciting his mantra and striving to relax. Struggling to relax. *Forcing* himself to relax—

Shit. All right. Start again.

It was slow going, and a bit of a hodgepodge. He was a skinny white kid (and not just regular white, but *Mormon* white) trying to grope his way to . . . something. There was a larger world out there, if only he could get to it.

> I am very, very lonely. I've got myself and that's all, besides the burden I'm carrying . . . the burden of change. The burden of being myself (my only possession). If I lose myself by conforming to be exactly what they want me to be, I lose the only thing I've got. I need somebody to tell me some of my ideas are right. I know dope is bad, no argument, but shit, what about everything else?
>
> I need somebody to believe in me!

Angel Dressed in Black

Monday, August 24, 1970

At Pleasant Grove High School, the carpets were clean, and the windows were spotless. Textbooks were ready for brown-paper covers; chalkboards for names and assignments. Out in the hallway, locker doors *clanged*, blending with chatter and rustle.

Teresa Blain should have been excited, or even nostalgic. It was her final year; in nine months, she'd be done with school and on to whatever came next.

Instead, she just felt lonely. She'd had a bad breakup, and didn't have many friends. Lots of people knew her—sort of—and they all assumed she was popular. How could she not be? She was gorgeous. Even decades later, that was the word everyone used: *gorgeous.* Dark-eyed and willowy, with long, chestnut hair, Teresa stood out at Pleasant Grove High, where everyone *seemed* blond, even if they weren't.

But as the students flowed past, everyone shoving and making plans for later, Teresa felt isolated. It had been that way for a long time, and nobody seemed to notice.

She didn't have an easy way with people, and small talk was a mystery. When she tried it, everything came out sideways. It was easier to just hold back, to keep some distance.

And what happened then?

Teresa's a little stuck on herself.

She couldn't win.

"Teresa!"

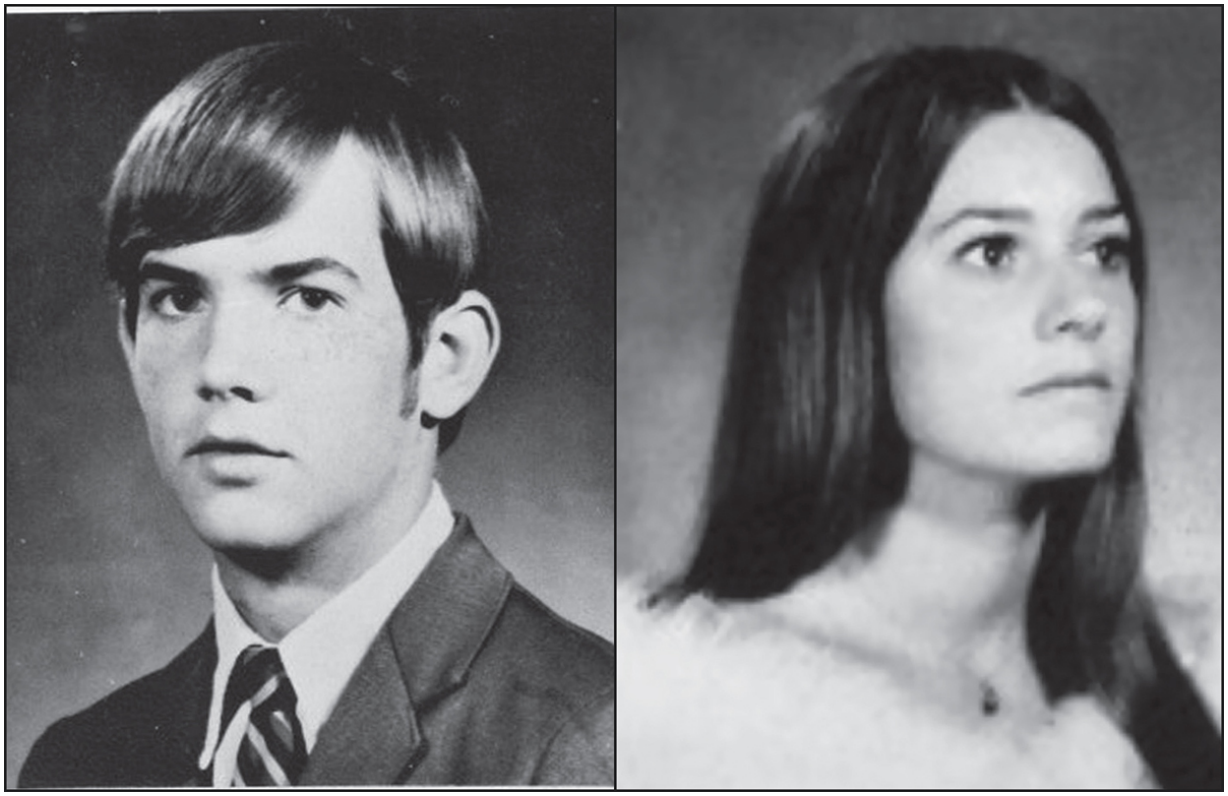
Someone was yelling her name, really shouting it.

There were people all around, so she couldn't quite see.

"Hey, Teresa!"

It was Alden Barrett, slipping through the crowd. Alden, with his big smile and his big bright eyes.

They'd met before; Teresa had dated a friend of Alden's, so their paths crossed now and then. They'd never discussed anything real or deep. Just fluff talk—the kind of thing Teresa failed at. And now, here he was, bounding toward her like a rabbit on springs.



Alden Barrett and Teresa Blain, from the Pleasant Grove High School yearbook (Courtesy of Pleasant Grove High School).

"Hi," he said, sort of *landing* in place. "How ya doing?"

It all went by in a blur. He was happy to see her, almost bouncing as they spoke. That was what stood out to her, even years later. He was so *excited* to see her.

Alden said he was ready for school, eager to get back in class and really make a go of it. It was infectious, that smile of his. Even Teresa, who was glum as glum could be, began to perk up.

Then it was class time, and everyone scattered.

Standing in the hallway, Teresa Blain had no idea that things had just taken a very sharp turn—or that someday, far in the future, students in the very same hallway would say her name in a dark, thrilled whisper.

Friday, August 28, 1970

On the first Friday of every school year, Pleasant Grove High School held its "Hi Dance," a badly named opportunity for awkward teenage courtship. There was a live band, decorative streamers, the obligatory fruit punch (*sans* spiking), and adults lurking everywhere.

Alden was still under house arrest, but the dance was a school function, and his parents gave permission. He found a clean shirt, brushed his hair, and headed to PGHS.

Over on Locust Avenue, Teresa Blain got dressed and made the same trip. She didn't have a date, but it was her senior year, her last chance for most of this.

• • •

Inside the school gymnasium, local band Call 'n' Jeff was thumping away, the echo swallowing everything. Teresa looked around, saw the decorations and paired-off silhouettes, and gave herself a mini pep talk. *It's a dance*, she thought. *So I'll dance. It'll be fun.* Trying to believe it.

Time went by. No one approached. After a while, she walked over to a boy from her class and said hello.

Nothing happened.

“Do you want to dance?” she asked. *It can’t be this hard.* Here she was, making the first move, and this guy was just letting her flail.

Out in the murky distance, she saw Alden dancing with someone. A moment later, he glanced over and saw Teresa.

Meanwhile, Teresa’s would-be dance partner still hadn’t answered. Then the song ended, and she didn’t know what to do. *How do other people manage this?*

Alden and the girl were leaving the dance floor, heading for the room’s far side. As Teresa watched, Alden escorted the girl to her seat—then turned, and walked over to Teresa.

“Hello,” he said.

“Hi.”

“Would you like to dance?”

Yes. Very much.

They swayed through several songs, the dark-haired boy and the dark-haired girl. After a while, they wanted to talk without the music and chatter, so they went outside, to a patio off the main building.

The night was warm, with just a slight breeze, and they talked for a long, long time.

Somehow, the conversation came around to suicide.

• • •

Later, Teresa called the discussion “offhand”—a minor part of a much longer talk. But it was shadowy ground, especially coming so early.

“If you were going to commit suicide, how would you do it?” she asked Alden.

“How would *you* do it?” he asked back.

It was hypothetical, but not really—a twist on the push-and-pull game of seduction. Lovers who haven’t yet kissed throwing similar feints, discussing all the ways in which something *might* happen.

If it happened.

Which it won't.

Of course not.

Because it's a bad idea.

The worst.

It's all just talk, until it isn't.

A year earlier, Teresa's parents had made her break up with a boyfriend, and she'd swallowed a bottle of aspirin. It knocked her unconscious for more than a day and scared the hell out of everyone. Luckily, word hadn't spread.

Now she was standing outside, swapping death talk with a boy she hardly knew. Alden's dramatic side, sharpened by adolescence, was instantly attached. They could *save* each other.

They talked and laughed, and the warm breeze tickled past. Far above, clouds moved over a star-filled sky, and if you looked at just the right moment, you could see the soft glow of Saturn.

Bad Reputation

When school resumed on Monday, Alden grew nervous. What if Teresa *didn't* like him? Maybe she'd just been killing time during the dance. It seemed unlikely, but what if?

Alden knew a girl who sat near Teresa in the mornings. With strained casualness, he asked her to gauge Teresa's interest, then report back ASAP.

The news was mostly good. Teresa had been thinking a lot about their Friday night talk, and Alden had made an impression. But, warned the friend, Teresa didn't date "younger guys."

No problem. Alden Barrett, sixteen-year-old, rechristened himself Alden Barrett, *seventeen*-year-old. It was goofy and totally unconvincing, which made it kind of charming, and when Alden asked Teresa to a debate-club party, she said yes.

"That first date," Teresa said later, "is when everything clicked. That's when we fell in love."

That's when we fell in love.

No one takes that seriously from a teenager. Ask a dozen adults, and you'll get the same answer twelve times: *That's not love; it's a crush.* (*Or just hormones*, they think, but rarely say.)

But consider love. Real and true, like the poets describe it. The twist in your stomach, the dizzy brightness in your chest. How it gives you strength while sapping your will. How it fills you up and hollows you out. The agonizing joy. The terrible hurt you can't live without.

No one—*no one*—feels those things like a teenager. It's the first pure rush of a cold-fire drug, and it's something we chase, with mixed results, for the rest of our fading lives.

Sept. 24th

Well things are looking up! Yes things may be getting better. I might be finding someone "to see." Yeah, things are looking up. I just might ask her to the Debate Party if things go right. Well, there are times... there certainly are times....

The vibrations have struck home - someone grown up, someone of my kind. Someone real. An individual, an understanding ear, a seeing eye. an open mind. Living, breathing, walking, talking, listening, loving, holding.

CAT WITH TIME and CLOSE TIES

Alden's first significant mention of Teresa. Alden illustrated many entries with abstract or playful drawings; this cat appears to be wearing Alden's own patched jeans/army jacket ensemble. (Courtesy of Scott Barrett).

From their first dance, Alden and Teresa were locked in a mutual orbit, oblivious to the rest of creation. For Alden, every thought of the future now included Teresa. She was the only constant.

Whatever lay ahead, leaving Pleasant Grove would be a good start. The whole town felt like Autopia, Disneyland's car-on-rails exhibit. You could steer left or right, but the wheels only moved a few inches, and sooner or later, everyone made the same slow turns, passed the same markers, and ended up in the same old place.

Alden didn't want that, and he didn't understand how anyone could. There was a whole *world* out there, ready to be seen. And with Teresa by his side, he could go anywhere, do anything.

Of course, it wasn't that simple. Alden was a junior, and Teresa was a senior. Come June, there would be choices, temptations, and maybe distance.

But that was nine months away—a lifetime. The bigger issue was Alden's past, especially his recent drug bust. He'd managed to stay clean, but the arrest was out there, lurking, threatening to spoil everything. Teresa knew about the lockup, about the probation and house arrest, but her parents didn't, and that was for the best.

In Utah County, dating wasn't just social. The goals were marriage and children, in that order. As a result, young Mormon life could resemble triage, with teens (or their parents) quick to discard non-marriage material.*

Why can't Alden come over? Why don't we see more of him? Where is he always hiding? Teresa couldn't explain to her parents without telling them everything, and Alden didn't want to lie, so they just dodged the issue, which worked for a while.

But social pressure made things tricky. The whispers were bad enough. It seemed like most of Pleasant Grove knew about Alden's drug bust, and combined with the ragged hair and the scruffy clothes, people felt free to judge.

"Condemnation was so heavy at that time because the drug situation was so prevalent," says Jeri Craner, Alden's English teacher at PGHS. "I

think a lot of people were using Alden for an example. He was very well known, and everyone knew he'd done drugs."

Craner, an exacting teacher beloved by her students, was fond of Alden, and thought he could really go places. But the fixation on Teresa seemed premature, even unhealthy.

"From the time he met Teresa," says Craner, "Alden felt like he'd met his future. His whole existence revolved around her."

• • •

At Teresa's house, a similar cloud was looming. Her parents worried about the obsessive focus on a boy Teresa barely knew. What would happen if (and probably *when*) things fell apart?

They had to be careful. The last time they'd ordered a breakup, Teresa had swallowed enough aspirin to scorch her nervous system. Apart from a serious ulcer, she'd come out all right, but what about next time?

So they wouldn't step in. Not yet. Instead, they counseled perspective. *You're seventeen, with a whole future ahead. Don't limit yourself.*

Teresa was firm. She didn't want to date other people; she wanted to date Alden, and *only* Alden. (And by the way, hadn't Teresa's own mother gotten married at *eighteen*, barely older than Teresa was now?)

The Blains eased up but made their feelings clear. *Alden Barrett is not a long-term prospect.*

Like Teresa's parents, Doyle and Marcella Barrett were wary of the light-speed courtship, but for different reasons. They'd met Teresa and liked her at once. She was charming and smart, and she made Alden happy; that last part alone was enough to win them over. But it was still early, and the first glow of love could hide a lot of problems. *Just take it slow,* they told him. *Make sure it's what you both want, and be ready for some hard times.*

Teresa would finish school a year ahead of Alden, and what would happen then? Was she going to college? Or would she just sit around, waiting? What did Alden want to do after graduation? Had they even discussed it?

There was also Alden's sobriety to think of. He was six weeks clean and staying straight. What would happen if things went south with Teresa? It might push him back toward drugs, and that would be a disaster.

Still, there was only so much Doyle and Marcella could control, so they gritted their teeth and hoped for the best.

For Alden and Teresa, "long term" had no real meaning. What mattered was *today. Now.* The way everything else went quiet when they locked eyes. The electric surge when their hands touched.

Seeing each other at school wasn't enough; the phone calls and letters and million little notes weren't enough. There could *never* be enough, not of the person who made you whole.

Writing in his journal, Alden was direct and painfully wide-eyed:

> What can I say? We communicate, we express, we interact, we feel, we happen. We Happen! We lean on each other. It doesn't need a reminder, or force of lies, or encouragement, it just happens.
>
> I am joyful.

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* Because unmarried Mormon adults are (in some interpretations) barred from the highest level of heaven (and thus, from reuniting with devout relatives), even nonbelievers can feel compelled to marry young. Nobody wants to ruin a dying mother's dreams of the afterlife.

Wouldn’t It Be Nice

From *Improvement Era*, the official magazine of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Volume 70, Number 6:

> The achievement of a happy marriage begins in childhood and youth. The opportunity of marriage begins in the early days of school. The young girl who plays the violin is more likely to find a good mate than one who sits at home . . . the boy who participates in athletics is more likely to find a mate than one who sits by the radio.

The October air was cool, with only the barest hint of winter. Overhead, the sky was a vast Persian expanse, slivered with faraway jewels of tiny, frozen light.

Alden and Teresa held hands, walking and talking, cutting a slow arc through Pleasant Grove.

> WHERE: Clean places, decent places, proper places. No “adventuring” or “slumming” in dives or questionable surroundings. No place where the Spirit of the Lord will not likely be present.

Alden was still under house arrest, and just slipping outside was risky, but it was worth it. You couldn’t see someone over the phone, couldn’t

inhale them or feel the warmth of their hand. Most of all, you couldn't feel the *stillness*—that moment when all the frantic buzzing fell silent and you were at peace. Nights like this, when they could both get away for a while, made the rest of it bearable.

> WHAT: Fun things, wholesome things. Church-going dates, work parties, service projects. Cultural and educational activities, close-to-the-beauties-of-nature experiences, hospital and shut-in visits. Things pleasing to you, to parents, to God.

They passed the high school, then curved left, looping back toward Teresa's house. Finally, they kissed and said goodnight, already thinking of next time.

> HOW: With others, in groups, appropriately dressed, cheerfully, courteously, modestly, wisely, prayerfully.
>
> Have a happy time!

"One night," Teresa later said, "we drank some coffee and smoked a cigarette. But that was just to be cool."

Purgatory

Wednesday, October 7, 1970

Alden arrived at the Provo Courthouse, a giant stone building with tree-sized pillars. His probation ran until mid-March, but he hoped to get the house arrest lifted. That would make everything easier, especially with Teresa's parents.

His feelings about authority notwithstanding, Alden could make a good impression when he wanted. It was easy: wear a suit, make eye contact, and speak with feeling. Show respect, but don't grovel.

Sure enough, the judge ended the house arrest, which left only probation. *Another five months*, thought Alden. *Come March 15, it will all be over. Just stay clean.*

He couldn't afford to get busted again. Not for anything. Another bust would mean jail time, and that would kill things with Teresa, one way or another. Ducking out to see her had been dangerous, but now they wouldn't have to hide. Now they could do things like a real, actual couple. It was enough to make his heart race.

Another five months. That's all.

Alden was eight weeks sober, and he kicked himself over past mistakes. All those wasted months, and for what? So he could go to court and appease some gavel-wielding fascist? No thanks. Drugs might free your mind, but

they could put your *ass* in jail, and that's a risk he wouldn't take. Not anymore. Not since Teresa.

Besides, he had enough to worry about.

Goddamned LSD. What was I thinking?

• • •

Even in Pleasant Grove, the stories floated around.

. . . that stuff stays in your system forever . . .

. . . in the spinal cord . . . in the fluid . . .

. . . little crystals of acid, they lodge there . . .

. . . seven years . . .

. . . and cause flashbacks . . .

Some of the whispers were specific, with the heavy ring of authority:

If you've taken LSD more than seven times (or maybe nine?), *you're legally insane.*

No, it's the number of hits in a month. Take it more than four times in one month, and you're legally crazy. After that, they won't even let you testify in court.

It was all hogwash, but nobody rushed to correct the rumors. If the kids had a little fear, that was fine. Whatever kept them straight.

• • •

The worst lie of all wasn't even a rumor; it was bullshit from an official source.

According to doctors at the State University of New York, LSD actually *broke* your chromosomes, causing all sorts of problems, like cancer and heart failure. And if you eventually had children? That's right: you'd pass along your mangled genes, spreading the pain to a new generation.

By 1970, the LSD/birth defect link was accepted wisdom, the price that you (and your unborn offspring) would pay for a moment of heedless indulgence.

But it wasn’t true. The study was flawed, and its conclusions were false. LSD wasn’t necessarily *good* for you, and if you bought it on the street, it might be contaminated, but it didn’t break your chromosomes, and it didn’t cause birth defects; claims that it did were simply wrong. But nobody knew that part—and wouldn’t know it for another two years, when science finally debunked itself.

In the meantime, Alden worried, and wondered, and rued his past behavior. Harming his own body was one thing, but he wanted to have kids someday. How could he face himself—or his children—if they were born damaged?

How could he face Teresa?

It wasn’t a theoretical concern. Alden and Teresa hadn’t slept together, but they’d taken an even bigger step. In mid-October, just a month after their very first dance, Alden proposed. And Teresa said yes.

From Here to Eternity

Tuesday, October 20, 1970

> I proposed to Teresa today and she accepted. We'll be married on the night of the Sweater Swing—Nov. 6th. I know it's just pretend, but it does have significance. We're getting there—at least we're headed in that direction.
>
> —Alden Barrett, journal entry

Things were looking up. The juvenile court had lifted Alden's house arrest, and his probation would end on March 15. At school, his grades were improving, and he'd joined both the choir and the drama club, landing roles in *Oklahoma!* and *The Mouse That Roared*.

Debate, though, that kept him sane. In debate, nobody won by being the loudest or the shrillest, or by having the biggest platform. In debate, you had to make sense. It was one place where logic—where *facts*—still mattered, and for Alden Barrett, stuck in a world of "John-Birch fascism, Mormonism, and other assorted bullshit," it was the perfect outlet.

By the fall of 1970, he was the team's president.

All of this circled Teresa. Thanks to her, a maddening, confusing world was suddenly bearable, even joyful. Who would hesitate to make that official?

True, Alden was barely sixteen, and Teresa just a year older, but in Utah, you could marry (with parental approval) at fourteen. At Pleasant Grove High, a few students were already married, and even more were engaged. It was the same across America, with most states allowing marriage at fifteen or younger. Some, like Pennsylvania, had *no* minimum age; find the right judge in Pittsburgh, and you could marry a third grader.*

The real hang-up was familial. As minors, Alden and Teresa would need their parents' permission. Alden made the case to Doyle and Marcella: he loved Teresa, and she loved him. She was nearly done with school, and he only had another year to go. They wanted to be together and wanted to make it official.

Marcella and Doyle weren't crazy about the idea, but they also weren't blind. Alden adored Teresa, and the feeling seemed mutual. If they stood in the way, Teresa might get pregnant out of wedlock, and in Pleasant Grove, that would be a nightmare.

Marcella had a long talk with Alden about marriage, what it meant and what it required. It wasn't just daisies and splendor—it was hard work, and sometimes, you had to put your own wishes aside. It was a compromise. Was he ready for that?

Alden said all the right things, and Marcella could see the recent changes in him. The anguished boy who pulled at his own hair and cried himself to sleep—he was gone. In his place was a young man; still troubled, perhaps, but getting better.

Maybe this—the connection with Teresa—was the final missing piece.

"After talking with Alden about the feelings he had for Teresa," Marcella said later, "I was willing to go along with it, even if it meant the two of them getting married younger than they should. I thought that with lots of understanding, and maybe some marriage counseling, they could make it."

One of the few adults Alden trusted, English teacher Jeri Craner, tried to slow things down, and did her best to paint a larger picture.

"I pointed out the age difference," says Craner. "Teresa was a year older. I said he needed to take that year and really get some counseling to make things work."

When Alden resisted, Craner pressed the point. “I’m not saying you won’t marry her,” she told Alden, “but give *yourself* some time.”

Even as she spoke, Craner could see her words falling away. Alden was smart but naive, in thrall to his own limited vision. To him, Teresa was the answer, the key to a glorious future. She would fix him. She would keep him sane.

You’ve known her six weeks, Craner wanted to scream. *You think you’ve got it all figured out, but you just don’t.*

It was a stalemate, and eventually, Craner gave up. Watching Alden leave the classroom, she worried about how things would end.

“He was so deeply, emotionally involved with Teresa by that time,” says Craner. “She was his whole reason for being.”

• • •

In the end, it was moot. Teresa’s parents weren’t approving any marriage, to anyone. Marcella paid the Blains a visit, and the three parents had a long talk. No dice.

It made sense. Teresa was mercurial, with a prior suicide attempt. And Alden, well, where to start? He was grubby and argumentative, always poking at the Church. Both were still in high school. Neither had a real job. Divorce was already rampant in America, and the younger you married, the harder it was to *stay* married. Mormon divorce rates were lower than average, but even so, success was a long shot.

So the answer was *No*.

It was frustrating, but there was nothing to do but wait. The timing was fortuitous: Teresa’s eighteenth birthday—March 17, 1971—was just two days after Alden’s probation ended. It all seemed fated.

• • •

With official marriage off the table until March, the couple planned a symbolic wedding, a placeholder for the real thing. Teresa knew just the

spot.

As a child, she'd visited Timpanogos Memorial Gardens, a cemetery just south of Pleasant Grove. There, atop a large granite block, was a statue of Jesus carved from a single piece of white marble. From the base, lush green lawn stretched in every direction, and at night, the silence was almost physical—a heavy, natural quiet rustled only by crickets.

"I always remember that statue as a great comfort to me," Teresa said later, "and as a little girl, I wanted to get married in front of it."

Alden created a small invitation. On the front was a cluster of tiny red flowers. Inside, his descending, hand-lettered script:

Announcing
a
Marriage

Alden
and
Teresa

November the Sixth,
1970, yr. of our Lord

As Alden slipped the folded card to Teresa, neither teen had any idea how public this wedding would eventually be.

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* In 2020, Pennsylvania made eighteen the minimum age for marriage.

Heaven Tonight

Friday, November 6, 1970

It was cold and cloudy, and maybe the happiest night of Alden Barrett's life.

The 1970 Sweater Swing dance was themed "Out in the Country," which translated to hay bales and plastic flowers bordering the gymnasium floor. Off in one corner, a local band called Five Deep played fake soul and mellow pop. Near the front door, a ballot box announced "Vote for PGHS Sweater King and Queen!"

A little after 8:00 PM, Alden and Teresa paid the three-dollar door fee and entered the PGHS gym. On the far side, a photographer was taking pictures for two dollars each. Alden and Teresa made their way over, waited in line, then got in place for a photo.

It was gothic by way of Lawrence Welk. Against a pleated white curtain and hanging plastic vines, Teresa—with a dark sweater, dark skirt, dark mid-calf boots, and long dark hair—sat on a low stool, her mouth a straight line.

Standing behind Teresa, hands on her shoulders, Alden wore a black dress shirt, pressed and close-fitting, with just the top button open. By Utah standards, his hair (think John Lennon, circa *A Hard Day's Night*) was a travesty; by 1970 standards, it was almost square, barely touching his ears.

Teresa smoothed her skirt. Alden raised his chin and cocked his head to the left.

Did they want to smile? Maybe just a *little*?

Nope. They gave the camera their stoic best.

Click.

It was the only photo the couple ever took.

Alden and Teresa, November 6, 1970 (Courtesy of Pleasant Grove High School; Scott Barrett).

• • •

After the dance, Alden and Teresa made their way to Timpanogos Memorial Gardens, then to the marble statue, where they stood for a moment.

The autumn air had a bite, but things were crisp and dry. Alden had a small prayer rug, one of his gestures toward non-Mormon belief. He spread it out on the grass. Then he and Teresa knelt. They held hands and said their wedding vows, a mix of traditional and personal. Even with no minister and no binding law, it felt real enough for eternity.

After a few minutes, they kissed and stood up, then walked hand in hand through the darkness.

There was no honeymoon, even by teenage standards. Free love might have been sweeping the nation, but Utah County remained its own planet: a place where sexual misdeeds, from masturbation to same-sex relations, were literally worse than death.

“Sexual purity is youth’s most precious possession,” official Church doctrine declared. “Better dead and clean than alive and unclean.”

What the Church decreed, its members enforced. Mormon culture was communal and self-policing, and news of misconduct traveled fast. Even a whisper that you’d done *it* (or anything close to *it*), and your name would be dirt, forever. Hence the young marriages. Hence the high birth rate. Hence the shame and depression and keeping of secrets.

Alden and Teresa never slept together, but that night, they shared a long kiss on Teresa’s front porch. They were young and perfect, and ready to live forever.

Looking back, Teresa knows the midnight wedding might seem ridiculous, but it didn’t feel that way, and still doesn’t.

Of the young man she married that night, Teresa says simply, “I loved him so much.”

At-Risk

Wednesday, November 11, 1970

In a town of five thousand, nothing stays secret for long.

Just days after the midnight wedding, someone (Teresa never learned who) spilled the news to her parents. Worse, the same person filled them in on Alden's summertime drug bust.

The Blains saw their daughter making compound mistakes, the kind you couldn't reverse, and they acted accordingly. They told Teresa, in no uncertain terms, that it was time to drop Alden and start dating other boys.

Teresa was seventeen and still in high school; her parents were the final word. She broke the news to Alden, and tried to spin it for the best. *They just need time to calm down. Once they cool off, we'll be fine.*

Alden was heartsick. More than that, he was angry, and vented in his journal:

> Teresa's parents have discovered my past.
> They are looking for a prophet—someone to *sell* Teresa to, someone who will take Teresa to the 'temple' and give her eternal happiness. Mormonistic B.S. goals. I'd have nothing against [those goals] if they applied to Teresa, but they *don't* apply, and they don't apply to me, either.

> Well, in March, Teresa will turn 18. The summer of my Junior year and my Senior year in high school will tell what we have for each other. But the situation is kinda bad at present.
>
> Thank God for [English teacher] Mrs. Craner and her encouragement, and all the others who have faith in me. I am going to make it.
>
> I love you, Teresa. Keep your cool and we'll stick it out.

Then, out of nowhere, came another ugly shock.

Thursday, December 17, 1970

Outside the windows of Pleasant Grove High School, the temperature hovered at freezing, and cottony snow was falling.

With winter break just days away, students and teachers alike were feeling the pull of Christmas. Whatever lay ahead, it could wait a few weeks.

Morning classes had barely begun when word spread that Renee Amar Richards, a friend of Alden's, was in the hospital. No one knew the details, just that Renee had gone to the emergency room and hadn't come home yet.

Alden went to Jeri Craner and asked to be excused from class; he wanted to visit Renee. Craner gave her permission, and Alden left for the hospital.

When he returned a few hours later, he could barely speak.

Craner asked about Renee.

Alden didn't answer. He was somewhere else.

Craner sat him down and tried again, bracing for the worst.

"Alden, what happened to Renee?"

Renee, who was sixteen, had slashed her wrists at home, but been found in time. Her parents had committed her to a psych ward, where, as soon as she had the chance, she filled the bathtub, wedged herself under the faucet, and inhaled water until she died. No one knew why.

Two days later, her obituary ran in the *Daily Herald*:

> Renee Amar Richards, 16, died Thursday evening, Dec. 17, at the University Hospital, Salt Lake City, of a short illness.

• • •

The argument for whitewashing suicide goes like this: too much attention, especially in the press, can trigger more suicides, creating a chain reaction.

That's indisputably true. Research confirms that excessive discussion of a suicide (particularly a celebrity suicide) leads other people to kill themselves. In some cases, merely *knowing* that a friend committed suicide is enough to cause dangerous depression, and that's without preexisting conditions.*

But how much discussion is "excessive"? And what happens when no one says *anything* about a suicide, even when the word is already out?

Whisper streams are a force of nature, and sooner or later, fragments of truth start to circulate, especially in peer groups. For anyone already fighting depression, the lies and cover-ups send a clear message: *Don't talk about it.*

As silence deepens, thoughts turn inward, and odds of another death increase.

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* The hazards are starkest for at-risk teens, who already kill themselves at a rate four times higher than other adolescents. (Broadly, "at-risk" means those with emotional and/or behavioral problems, as well as those from poor or dysfunctional families.) Things are even worse in Utah, where suicide has long been the number one killer of teenagers. (The expanded picture is scarcely better: Utah's overall suicide rate—i.e., including all ages—is nearly double the national average.)

Days Full of Night

Monday, December 21, 1970

It was just a few hours until winter solstice, when dark stretched on forever. Outside, Pleasant Grove was cold and frozen.

Earlier that day, Alden had gone to Renee's funeral, where everyone heard the "short illness" story. There was no release, just bleak, ugly pressure.

Afterward, Alden longed to see Teresa. Just touching her relaxed him; it slowed the chaos and let him breathe. But Teresa's parents were inflexible, and school was out until January, so he just had to wait.

He opened his journal and began to write.

> I'm learning to cope. With Mrs. Craner's help, I'm learning about Teresa.
>
> (I'm also going to try and write more poetry, lyrics, what have you.)
>
> I'm sitting here wishing for a cigarette
> lonely for the girl I met and hoping
> that the girl I met might be on the next bus home
> The time that I was looking for closed
> their doors and we're no more and so I wait

> in silence and alone

• • •

Jeri Craner had adopted Alden as a kind of project, steering him toward focus. Everyone knew that Craner could talk to Alden, and they knew that Alden would listen. When Alden seemed to be drifting, Craner would pull him aside for a few words. Sometimes, Teresa would ask Craner to check in, just to make sure he was all right.

"Teresa would sense it, or Alden would say something to me," remembers Craner, "and I'd say, 'Alden, promise you'll call me.'"

Before grief counselors and school therapists and online support groups, this was how it worked. A loose coalition of friends and teachers, all doing their best to keep each other upright.

Now and then, Craner would stop by the Barretts' house. She'd talk with Doyle and Marcella, then she and Alden would walk or drive through Pleasant Grove, Alden mostly griping, and Craner trying to give some perspective.

It's not enough to obsess about Teresa, Craner told him. *You've got to build your own life. Give Teresa some breathing room. Let her figure things out.*

If it's meant to be, she said, *it will be. If not, you've still got to live.*

• • •

Teresa, meanwhile, was doing her best to please everyone: her parents, Mrs. Craner, Alden. It was easy to put herself last.

Over the Christmas holidays, she tried to placate her parents by going on a date with someone else. It was no big deal, or shouldn't have been, but Alden heard about it secondhand. Now, his anger and grief had a partner: jealousy. The hours alone gave him lots of time to imagine all the worst things, and his brain turned in on itself.

Word got back to Teresa, who felt terrible. She should have told Alden about the date herself, before it happened, but things just felt so complicated. Talking with Alden was never casual; everything *churned*.

A part of her liked it, his balance of joy and anguish. It was beautiful in a strange, dark way. Until it went haywire. Then it just hurt.

The surges had been there since childhood, when Alden would burst into tears or pull at his hair. At sixteen, he could ride out the peaks and valleys, mostly, or even embrace them. They were, in all their shifting power, a kind of constant.

But the extremes were exhausting. They were, in the end, just floods of chemicals—neurotransmitters spraying from a broken dam, then stopping, then starting again.

In time, and properly treated, such things can level off. The shifts become less frequent, less intense. Life is less colorful, but also less blinding.

Alden wasn't even close to that, and now he was back in a bad, familiar place. A room filled with trip wires and no obvious exit.

Doyle and Marcella talked with Alden's shrink, but didn't learn much. Citing privacy, he wouldn't discuss what Alden said, even in vague terms. He did, however, share his formal diagnosis: Alden wasn't depressed. Moody, perhaps, but not depressed.

Doyle and Marcella knew better. They had lived with Alden for sixteen years, and seen his bleak moments firsthand. Even now, nearing adulthood, there were nights when he was scared to be alone. He would put it off as long as possible, staying up late and talking with his parents until he finally fell asleep on the living room couch. Other nights, he trembled with anxiety, tears streaming down his face. Why? He didn't know. He couldn't say.

Alden isn't depressed.

Doyle thought about that "diagnosis" on nights when Alden couldn't sleep or couldn't stop worrying. The nights when Marcella sat near Alden's bed, watching over her fitful, anxious son until morning.

Doyle wanted better answers. What about medication?

Alden doesn't need medication, said the psychiatrist. *He isn't* truly *depressed.*

One evening, Alden was upstairs, talking with his parents. Doyle had to be up early the next day for surgery, and finally called it a night. Alden had

that worried look, but no one knew what to do. Doyle and Marcella said goodnight and headed down the hallway.

CRASH!

They turned in time to see a flowerpot smash against the living room wall. Dirt and clay went everywhere, and large, broken chunks hit the floor.

For a moment, no one moved. Then Alden started crying.

Later, when Marcella thought back on it, Alden's expression might have been the very worst part. Not anger, or even sadness, but fear.

Patience

1970 had ended with Renee's suicide, and 1971 began with another, different loss. Two of Alden's closest friends, Kim Lewis and John Lundgren, had proposed to their girlfriends, and were now engaged. *Actually* engaged, in a way that Alden wasn't. In a few months, both John and Kim would be married and starting new lives. As for Teresa, she'd be done with school and making her own plans. Alden would be stuck in Pleasant Grove, facing another year at PGHS. Another year of homework and teachers and face-offs over politics. And a final, slow countdown to Vietnam.

On TV, flag-draped coffins were coming back in droves—more than fifty thousand so far. And nobody quite knew why. "The domino theory," they said. "For peace with honor," they said. It all just felt like momentum. In two years, that might be Alden coming off a plane, all boxed up and shrouded, or missing a hand, or blind, or in a wheelchair.

And there was no stopping it. He couldn't run away again, not without Teresa. He didn't have a draft card to burn, and Pleasant Grove didn't have a protest movement. The bastards wouldn't even let him *vote* until he was twenty-one, and he might be dead by then. So he picked fights at home, at school, anywhere he could. He bitched about cops and religion and the pressure to obey. And nothing changed.

He was holding out for March. Once Teresa turned eighteen, she could make her own decisions, and her parents wouldn't matter. Then, things would be easier.

Sunday, January 3, 1971

Well I'm just waiting
for the day
We'll be together, in our
way
side by side friends in
time
I'll be yours and you'll
be mine
The clouds will go girl,
we'll see the sun
and we'll be warm girl,
when the winter comes.
Right now, you know it seems
a long time to wait
but in almost no time we'll leave
this city of hate
and we'll be one, love
just you and me,
I'm just trying to tell you how it's
going to be (someday.)

Doyle went back to Alden's psychiatrist. Wasn't there *some* kind of medication they could try? Anything at all?

The psychiatrist repeated his verdict: Alden didn't need it. He wasn't really depressed.

Wednesday, January 6, 1971

> God, you bastard—why me?

Sunday, January 10, 1971

> This has been a week of depression; I'm getting over it, though. With my shrink and everything, it has been cool.
>
> My sister is a major cause of the problem. However, with time and space, I'll get over it.
>
> It is coming about with Teresa, coming back, into an existence of greater feelings and love.
>
> It's bitchin'.

It was his final entry.

Best of You

Saturday, February 6, 1971

In the frigid dark, more than eleven hundred students from all over Utah converged on the Alpine School District, just a few miles west of Pleasant Grove. Piling out of cars and buses, the teens stretched and yawned, their breath puffing into the cold, dry air.

The boys wore neckties, and the girls wore dresses. Some had briefcases, and others carried big file boxes. A few had boxes *and* a briefcase.

Coaches did head counts, then everyone made their way into the warm, dry buildings. Once inside, students checked the time, then double-checked their prep: file folders, fresh pens, legal pads, stopwatches.

Off to the bathroom for a quick once-over. Zippers up? Cowlicks down? Stockings smooth and unblemished?

Then came the waiting.

• • •

The Alpine School District Invitational Forensic Festival* was a big deal for Alden. This was his first year as president of Pleasant Grove High's debate

team, and the tiny group—now led by instructor Evelyn Rasmussen—was already punching above its weight. A win at Alpine, against more than fifty other high schools, would be an unmissable statement.

First-round schedules went up, and debaters got the info: opponent, judge's name, what room to go to, and what side of the issue they were taking. Then everybody dispersed, the banter and friendly tension turning to adrenalized thrum.*

Debate tournaments use a bracket system, narrowing the field from hundreds, to dozens, to a handful, to one. But debaters rarely know the winner of *one* round until the *next* round is posted. If you're scheduled, you keep going. If you're not, it means you lost, and you become a spectator, watching and brooding until things wrap.

Every round is more intense and nerve-racking than the last, the crowd swelling with ousted competitors, all of them watching and squinting, waiting to see if you'll choke. And as with any tournament (e.g., Wimbledon, presidential elections), there's no glory in finishing second. Beating all but a single competitor doesn't make you nearly perfect; it makes you a loser.

• • •

Through the morning and early afternoon, debaters fell away, vanquished. The defeated could at least relax a little; they no longer had to compete. The triumphant needed to maintain their focus, so they practiced and paced, one eye on the clock.

By 3:00 PM, only a few were still going, and when the final bracket went up, there was Alden's name. He grabbed his prep and headed to the classroom, where a crowd was already gathering.

Five weeks later, when it no longer mattered, the *Pleasant Grove Review* would state the simple truth:

> At the Alpine Invitational Speech Meet, Alden Barrett went undefeated.

* “Forensics” = debate and other types of competitive speech.

* To my fellow speech nerds: by necessity, I’m focusing on debate and its protocols. No offense to Impromptu, Extemp, and other disciplines.

The Downward Spiral

The sense of elation didn't last long. One of Teresa's old boyfriends, a guy named Barton Curtis, had finished a stint in the navy, and was back in Pleasant Grove.

Barton was trouble. He was rowdy, and liked to drink. Six months earlier, he'd rolled his car, putting himself and two passengers in the hospital. What's more, Barton was the boyfriend connected to Teresa's suicide attempt.

Back then, her parents hadn't wanted her dating someone four years older, let alone some kind of hell-raiser, and they'd ordered Teresa to break it off. Her parents had even gotten a court order to keep Barton away from her. *For her own good*, and all that.

Teresa enjoyed defying her parents, so she'd kept seeing him. Finally, Barton's mother had called Teresa's mom to complain. *Your daughter is going to land my son in jail.* That's when it all exploded, and Teresa had swallowed a few hundred aspirin.

Now, with Barton back in town, Alden had one more worry, especially when Teresa made noises about seeing him again—mainly to get back at her parents. *You don't want me dating just Alden? Fine. How about this?*

And she wasn't above trying to make Alden jealous, especially if it got him to focus and stop drifting off into Aldenland.

Once, they'd been at a basketball game, and Alden had just wandered away somewhere. No warning, nothing. She glanced over, and he was gone.

I'll show him, she'd thought.

It was halftime, and two guys were playing Ping-Pong at the back of the gym, so she went over and asked to join in. They were *extremely* welcoming, and after a while, she looked up. There was Alden, simmering in place, ready to fight.

It was like that a lot. You fought, you made up, you fought, you cried, you swore your undying love, then did it all over again. And if the hurt was bone deep, it still paled in trade. That's why you kept coming back.

So Alden tried not to fixate on Barton Curtis. Barton, who was older, and who'd been in the navy (a navy *fireman*, no less), and who had a past with Teresa, and . . .

It all just piled up.

Goodbye

Mid-February 1971

Alden got home from another day at PGHS. The house was quieter than normal.

Marcella was there, and she broke the news. Lately, Duchess had been sleeping more, sometimes ignoring treats or toys. No big surprise—she was nearly fourteen.

That day, it had been worse. She'd had trouble standing up, and there was a nasty lump on her sternum.

It was cancer, said Marcella, and Duchess had been in a lot of pain. Pain that couldn't be stopped. The vet had put her down.

Alden listened. Duchess was dead, and he hadn't been there for her.

It wasn't fair. *It wasn't fucking fair.*

The End

Friday, March 12, 1971

As the sun descended, it lit the horizon, and for a moment, Utah Valley was circled in fire. On every side, mountain peaks glowed orange, then faded to an icy, muted violet. The March air sharpened with the coppery smell of a final evening freeze.

Far below, dwarfed by mammoth walls of rock and snow, Utah County looked like an outpost, or a city in a bottle. Pinpoints of light—from porches, restaurants, cars—glittered and swarmed, moving with the slow pulse of winter.

On Center Street in Provo, Alden and Teresa walked toward the Paramount Theatre, a large movie house with fake marble pillars and deep red carpets.

After the stress of the past few weeks, it was a relief. For one thing, Alden and Teresa were on an actual *date*, their first in quite a while. Forget her ex-boyfriend and all the recent doubts. Teresa was here, holding Alden's hand, and that said everything, especially tonight.

Teresa's eighteenth birthday was just a few days away, which meant things would soon be better.

This was still Provo, so it was a double date; Alden and Teresa were joined by Alden's friend Steve and another girl. At the box office, the two

couples bought tickets to *Love Story*—one of the year's biggest movies, right behind *Fiddler on the Roof* and *The French Connection.*

Inside, they found their seats and had a moment to settle, their eyes adjusting to the dim light. Then, a crackle, and the Paramount logo filled the screen.

Right away, you knew things wouldn't end well. The music sounded like a funeral parlor's lobby, all dripping piano and slow violins. If you still had any hope, the movie's first words erased it:

"What can you say about a twenty-five-year-old girl who died?" asked Ryan O'Neal as Oliver Barrett, a scruffy Harvard preppy. "That she was beautiful and brilliant. That she loved Mozart and Bach. The Beatles. And me."

There was weirdness here. For one thing, that last name: *Barrett*. Just a coincidence, but still. And Ali McGraw, who played doomed everygirl Jenny Cavilleri, was a dead ringer for Teresa Blain.

For the next hundred minutes, Alden watched an autumnal, Ivy League version of his relationship with Teresa. The boy and girl who long to be together, but are cursed by timing and class-conscious parents. The breakups and reunions, the tearful declarations, the vows to never, ever give up.

"I give you my hand," says Oliver, quoting Walt Whitman as he slips a ring on Jenny's finger. "I give you my love more precious than money. I give you myself before preaching or law. Will you give me yourself? Will you come travel with me? Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?"

Then fate steps in and steals everything. Jenny has cancer. There's no cure, no hope, only a last few days together. Then time runs out.

The final scene is desolation. Oliver sits on the frozen steps of an empty, run-down skating rink, the snow and sky trapping the gloom. The camera pulls back, reducing him to a tiny, immobile speck in the distance. There is no one else. He is cut off, a young man facing the future alone, unable to connect with others. Trapped inside his grief, he sees only the bleak, lifeless present, with no hope or memory of the sun.

The movie pulled every string, took every cheap shot. By the end, you were either crying or heartless—and Alden Barrett had a soft, unprotected heart.

He also had hope. In a little over four days, Teresa would turn eighteen, and she could make her own decisions. She could tell her parents to go to hell—say she'd be with Alden no matter what.

Then, after leaving the theater, Alden and Teresa got into a fight.

• • •

The movie hadn't helped. Everyone's nerves were raw, emotions at the surface.

Teresa also knew what Alden wouldn't acknowledge: her birthday wasn't a magical fix. Alden was only sixteen, with more than a year of high school to go. What were they supposed to do, elope? And live where? On what? It would take time to figure things out.

For that matter, Teresa had another three months at PGHS, which meant at *least* three more months of living at home, skirmishing with her parents. Adolescence had pushed that relationship into the red: even now, as she entered adulthood, they were still on her case, pressuring her to see other people.

Alden on one side, her parents on the other. And nothing she did would please everyone. So she would split the difference . . . and go out with Barton Curtis. She didn't love him, so it was no threat to Alden, and it would buy some time while (maybe) teaching her parents to back off.

Talking to Alden after the movie, Teresa tried to explain.

For the rest of her life, she would insist it wasn't a breakup. "I was crazy about him," she says. "I loved him, and I'm sure he loved me."

But Alden heard *Barton Curtis* and *going on a date* and *see what happens* and God knew what else, and felt the ground slide away.

He got upset, then angry. And then they were fighting.

Before long, they were all in Steve's car—Alden and Teresa, and Steve and his date—and everything was awkward and tense, Alden's dark silence killing the mood.

They dropped the girls off, then Alden and Steve just drove around for a while.

Steve was seventeen, an age when every day brought new horizons. The world was bigger than Pleasant Grove; the world was *out there*, waiting to be seen.

But Steve also knew about Alden's internal weather and how he could vanish inside, walled off by gloom and frustration. Steve tried to coax a response, and it all came pouring out. At sixteen, Alden was exhausted. He'd been arrested, spent time in jail, run away from home, and kicked a drug habit. He'd lost his religion and tried to replace it with a mash of Eastern ideas, but Pleasant Grove was Mormon as mayonnaise, and no one wanted to hear that *Hare Krishna* bullshit.

He still dreamt of following in his father's footsteps and working in medicine. Sure, his grades had tanked, but that was only *schoolwork*—that was *not caring*. That was booze and dope and everything else he'd finally beaten. But he still loved the science. Science was *real;* it had answers and evidence. Pleasant Grove had only faith. And faith just wasn't enough.

Since childhood, Alden's brain had felt pressured, ready to explode. And he couldn't always explain it. Sometimes the words jammed together, bringing more frustration. Maybe no one would *ever* understand. Maybe this was it. Maybe this was life.

Now, above it all, Teresa had dumped him for someone else—he was sure of it. She *knew* how much he needed her—how she kept him sane, talked him down when his thoughts went wild. They had planned a life together. And now it was all in pieces.

His friends were graduating, getting married, seeing the world. He was stuck in Pleasant Grove, surrounded by kids and do-gooders and cinched-up hypocrites. He couldn't even have a cup of *coffee* without risking trouble—all those scolding, wrinkled looks.

Another two years. In this *place*.

And then what? With shitty grades, it wouldn't matter how smart he was. Vietnam was *full* of smart guys, all walking through the same dense, biting jungle. All toe tags and body bags.

Steve did his best, saying what he thought was true. *Things get better. Life goes on.*

They talked for almost two hours. Heading home that night, Steve hoped he'd said the right things.

“I was only seventeen,” he said thirty years later. “I didn’t have a hell of a lot of wisdom for him other than being a friend.”

And All That Could Have Been

Saturday, March 13, 1971

The morning sky was a wet wool blanket. Rain and ice pelted the Barretts' house as Alden dialed Teresa's number.

When she answered, Alden wished her an early happy birthday. It came out flat. He'd already bought her a present. Maybe if she was home later . . .?

The call fizzled out with no plans made. Teresa figured he would come over with the gift and they'd talk things through. Or maybe just talk on the phone again.

• • •

At home, Alden stayed in his room with the door closed. His parents had driven to Logan, two hours away, for an NCAA playoff game, so Alden was in charge of his younger siblings, Elaine, nine, and Scott, eleven. Outside, things were wet and mushy, so Elaine and Scott were inside, playing with a few neighbor kids.

Before heading to Logan, Marcella had written a chore list for Alden:

1. Replace burned-out light bulbs
2. Clean up your room
3. Get hair cut

He did the first two, and crossed them off.

• • •

The hours ticked by. Teresa waited. Wasn't Alden coming over, or at least calling back? She grew annoyed, then angry.

When the phone finally rang in late afternoon, sure enough, it was Alden. By this time, Teresa didn't even want to hear his voice, so she hung up. The phone rang again. She answered and hung up a second time.

Now it was almost like a game.

Okay, thought Teresa, *the next time he calls, I'll really answer.*

But he didn't call back.

• • •

At home, Alden slammed down the phone.

"Fucking bitch!"

He left the bedroom. Most of the other kids had gone home, so it was just Scott and Elaine, plus a friend of Elaine's named Katy.

"Did you feed Pete?" Alden asked. Pete was the family's new dog, another German shepherd.

No one had fed Pete. Scott and Elaine started fighting about whose job it was. Alden boiled over; he grabbed a fork and threw it at them. It missed, but it got their attention. Scott saw something scary in Alden's face; he looked frantic and helpless, like a trapped or injured animal.

Alden told Scott and Elaine to go play in their bedrooms. The neighbor girl, Katy, went with Elaine; Scott went to his own room, shut the door, and

started to play marbles. A few minutes later, Scott heard the front door close.

• • •

Over on Locust Avenue, Teresa waited for Alden to call back. When he didn't, she finally gave up. Her mother was taking her shopping for a birthday present, so Teresa bundled up and the two of them headed out.

Later, when Teresa got home, she saw something on the front porch—a cardboard box. Inside was a pair of gold earrings, plus some things she'd given to Alden: a small, framed picture of herself and a lock of her hair.

Teresa started to panic. Something was wrong, she could feel it. She wanted to phone Alden, but her parents were nearby, and though she was nearly eighteen, she wasn't allowed to call boys. *They* could call *her*, but she couldn't call them. And anyway, she didn't want her parents listening in. So she waited.

• • •

Scott was still playing marbles in his bedroom. He heard the front door open and close again: Alden was back. A few minutes later, Alden came to Scott's room. Scott figured he was still in trouble for fighting with Elaine, so he didn't say anything or even look up.

Alden just stood there, watching Scott shoot marbles.

After a long while, Alden spoke. "How ya doin'?"

Scott kept his eyes down. "Fine."

More time passed. Finally, Alden said, "I love you."

Scott didn't answer.

Alden said, "Well, goodbye," and walked away.

• • •

After a while, Scott wondered about dinner. His parents had left Alden enough money to take everyone to the Purple Turtle for burgers and fries. Scott figured that wouldn't happen now, not with all the yelling. Alden had probably left again, anyway. *Maybe I'll take some money from Alden's room*, he thought. *It's what he deserves for being so grouchy.*

Scott found a bobby pin and went to work on Alden's bedroom door. Elaine came out of her own room, followed by her friend Katy.

"What are you doing?" asked Elaine.

Scott said he was picking the lock to Alden's room.

To Elaine, this seemed like trouble. "Don't go in there!" she said as Scott opened the door.

Untitled

Dear world, I don’t want to get my hair cut, I don’t want to tend kids, I don’t want to see Teresa at school Monday. I don’t want to do my Biology assignment or English or history or anything. I don’t want to be sad or lonely or depressed anymore, and I don’t want to eat, drink, eliminate, breathe, talk, sleep, move, feel, or love anymore.

Teresa, it’s not your fault. Mom and Dad, it’s not your fault.

I’m not free, I feel ill, and I’m sad, and I’m lonely.

Into the Void

From the doorway, Scott saw Alden in profile. He was slumped in a chair, motionless—his head and face obscured.

Stepping inside, Scott saw that one of Alden's shoes was off. Then he saw the hole in Alden's right temple. Later, they'd see the gun, a small silver pistol from Doyle's home office.

On the carpet, a dark pool was spreading.

Scott heard something behind him.

Elaine.

He turned and yelled, "Don't come in!" but it was too late. She started screaming.

• • •

At a house just down the street, Scott and Elaine's older brother, Bryan, answered the phone. It was Elaine shouting, "Help us! Alden's bleeding!"

Bryan dropped the phone and bolted out the front door with his wife, Judy, close behind. Scott met them halfway, yelling, "Hurry up! Alden's bleeding bad!"

Bryan sprinted to the house and went downstairs.

When he saw Alden, Bryan shouted at Judy to get the kids out of the house, *now.*

Judy corralled the frantic children, steering them outside and down the sidewalk.

Once they were gone, Bryan picked up the phone.

• • •

One hundred twenty miles away, in the ten-thousand-seat Assembly Center arena, Doyle and Marcella Barrett watched BYU battle Utah State for a playoff slot.

A message came over the loudspeaker. *Dr. Doyle Barrett, please come to the main office. You have a telephone call.*

Doyle excused himself and threaded his way through the surging crowd, down the bleacher stairs, and toward the office.

• • •

After getting the kids into her own house, Judy tried to calm them down. As she spoke, her own young sons realized that something terrible had happened, and soon everyone was hysterical. In the chaos, Judy didn't see Scott slip out the front door, headed back home. He was running, praying, pleading. *God, I'll do anything. Anything. I'll do anything you want. Please, don't let Alden die. Please, God, please.*

He crept into the house and stood at the top of the stairs. He heard Bryan on the phone, saying that Alden had shot himself.

Scott had a flash. *We have to pray,* he thought. *We have to pray. We have to pray. We have to pray.*

He ran back to Bryan and Judy's house. As sirens wailed and children screamed, Scott tried to get everyone to kneel down. The din was deafening, so he tried to show them what he meant: knees against the floor, hands together, begging for Alden's life.

• • •

At the basketball arena, Doyle came back from the office. He had to shout over the cheering and whistles, and told Marcella they had to leave right away.

"What? Why?"

"We *have* to go home."

"Why? What's wrong?"

A long moment between two lives.

"Alden's been shot." It was all he knew.

He got Marcella to the car, and they roared toward Highway 89, heading for American Fork Hospital. Doyle drove as fast as he could, but the trip still took ninety minutes.

• • •

At Bryan and Judy's house, everyone tried to pray. Judy left for a moment, then came back. She gathered all the children close to her. She just said, "Alden's gone."

The crying had reduced to sniffles, but came back even harder. Except for Scott. He couldn't explain it, ever, but something went quiet. He felt separate, behind glass. The others sobbed and shook, but Scott just watched from someplace far inside.

• • •

Doyle and Marcella arrived at the hospital, where they learned that Alden was already in the morgue.

No need to identify the body. The children had seen it. Bryan had seen it.

There was nothing to do but go home.

• • •

As Doyle and Marcella left the hospital, family members converged on the house. Alden's body might have been gone, but the bloody evidence remained—brain and hair and cooling muck. A couple of the older siblings were downstairs, trying to wipe away the mess.

Doyle's medical partner, Dale Murdock, had already heard the news, and he arrived to check on everyone, especially the kids.

He gave Scott a sedative. Scott's body drooped; his heart slowed.

• • •

Marcella and Doyle finally made it home. Scott and Elaine ran to their parents, buried themselves in the warm scratch of clothing and familiar smells. They were sobbing again, shaking and silent. Doyle was a big man, with a doctor's assurance and control. He pulled his children close and promised them: *I will never neglect you again. I will spend more time at home. I will be here. I promise. I promise.*

Another Rainy Night (Without You)

Teresa was still at home. Alden had never called back, just left the earrings on her porch, plus the picture and lock of hair. She wished her parents would *go somewhere*, then she could call him.

Someone knocked at the front door.

Was it Alden? This late? Her parents didn't like him, and this wouldn't win him any points.

Teresa opened the door. It was the police.

They barraged her with questions. No explanation, just a bunch of things rapid-fire: What had Alden been doing earlier that day? Had the couple fought?

So, she thought, *he ran away again*.

The police told her Alden was dead. He'd shot himself.

This can't be happening, thought Teresa, as everything went swimmy.

Then she was in the backyard, where a scream tore out of her. She went to her knees, her voice going raw, shrieking and sobbing.

Then her father was there, reaching down.

He wrapped his arms around her and said, "I wish you'd never met him."

She wailed and couldn't speak. Couldn't form the words.

No, that's not it . . . not at all.

I loved him.

The Indifference of Heaven

Sunday, March 14, 1971

At the Barrett house, the long, awful night gave way to a glaring, shell-shocked morning.

Outside, the world made love, and danced, and laughed, told jokes, took naps, and worried about insignificant bullshit.

Inside, Alden's older siblings were trying to scrape his suicide off the bedroom wall. In 1971, there was no one to do that for you. Commercial cleaners wouldn't come near it, and the only other choice was tearing out the plaster. Blood soaks through everything given time, and dried brain matter might as well be superglue—even chisels won't take it off. So you do it now. You clean. And gag. And curse. You smell the rich iron, like you're inside a vitamin bottle. You hate your brother, and yourself. And you keep going.

Alden's bedroom held the scraps of teenage life: books and clothes and boxes of whatever. The older children sorted quickly, keeping this, discarding that. Nothing absorbent could stay; finding bone splinters in the laundry would make you want to die.

Certain things were set aside for cleaning: family photos, debate trophies, a cherished red Frisbee.

Someone—no one quite remembers who—decided to clean out the desk.

There, inside the top drawer, sat Alden's journal.

After flipping through the green spiral notebook, the older kids knew Marcella couldn't handle it. Not now. She had to bury her son in a day or two—there was no need to put his angry, sad thoughts right in front of her. It could wait.

They put the journal away. Later that day, Alden's psychiatrist arrived, and they let him read through it. He called the journal a "mental autopsy."

• • •

Sunday's other visitor was Leon Walker, the stake president. Like Catholics, Latter-day Saints divvied up the globe into slices, with a man in charge of each. A stake was a collection of ten or so congregations, usually a few thousand members total. The stake president was in charge of all those souls, and responsible for their spiritual welfare.

Leon Walker had guided families through all kinds of pain and tumult; now he stood in Marcella Barrett's living room and told her not to grieve for Alden. The boy, said Walker, had clearly been given more than he could handle.

This was not what Marcella expected to hear—not today of all days, with Alden in the morgue and his blood on the wall downstairs. *Don't grieve for him? For my dead child?*

Walker kept at it, saying Alden would have died anyway, probably from an illness, or an accident of some kind. It was predestined.

• • •

Latter-day Saints get conflicting messages about suicide and salvation. On the one hand, only God can truly judge a person. On the other hand, most roads to suicide are lit by the Devil himself.

"In his role as the destroyer," says the Church, "Satan can cause illness and death, but only with permission from God. He cannot take people before their time unless they disobey God and thus forfeit their mission."

But what about mental agony or physical suffering? What about cancer, or ALS, or clinical depression?

Read that passage again: “Satan can cause illness and death, but only with permission from God.”

If there’s anything worse than crippling misery, it might be knowing that God rubber-stamped your torment, but that’s the view of many religions, Christian and otherwise. Whatever the burden, you can bear it, *with* sufficient faith. But falter in your belief, and God will turn away.

And, though no one had said it out loud quite yet, there was an even darker possibility.

Alden might have been possessed.

Demonic possession wasn’t something the Church enjoyed discussing; it made nonbelievers roll their eyes. But it was part of the dogma. Satan could hijack minds and/or bodies, controlling them for his own vile purposes, and *that’s* what caused many mental (or even physical) ailments.

It would explain Alden’s misbehavior, the little crimes and boozing. The drug use and the long hair. All those angry questions about God and Church. Who but the Devil would put those ideas in a young man’s head?

Any way you sliced it, Alden Barrett had brought this on himself.

• • •

After a while, the stake president said his goodbyes and left, and Marcella stood there, wondering what had just happened.

A Place to Fall Apart

Inside Teresa, physical and emotional pain knotted together—hard, jagged snarls that spasmed in her chest. Sometimes, it felt like her heart would actually tear down the middle, everything spilling out.

On Sunday, she composed herself long enough to call Jeri Craner. Alden's suicide would be all over school Monday morning, and Teresa didn't want Mrs. Craner to be ambushed.

Craner was heartbroken. The last time she'd seen Alden was Friday afternoon, just a few hours before the *Love Story* double date. He'd been dejected, and was trying to pick himself up, trying to feel better. He was worried about Teresa's ex-boyfriend, and wondered if it was serious. *I don't think so,* Craner had said. *I think he wants to start up again, but I'm not sure about Teresa. I think she's just trying to show her parents some independence. To show they don't control her.*

Then Alden had said goodbye—just for the weekend, Craner thought—and that was that. She saw him walking away, down the hall toward the outer doors.

Now, in Teresa's voice, Craner heard the same dour tone.

She's planning it, Craner thought.

As soon as the call finished, Craner phoned Teresa's parents, who—amazingly—were planning to leave town for a few days. That was a bad idea, said Craner.

The Blains canceled their trip and kept an eye on Teresa, unsure what to say or do.

Letting You Go

DAILY HERALD

PL. GROVE YOUTH DIES

> PLEASANT GROVE—Alden Niel Barrett, 16, 1035 E. 550 S., was found dead of what police said was an apparently self-inflicted gunshot wound Saturday evening.*
>
> He was a member of the LDS Church, living in the Pleasant Grove 8th Ward.

On Saturday, Alden had been alive. On Tuesday, his body was on display. By one estimate, more than nine hundred people attended the viewing—nearly 20 percent of Pleasant Grove's entire population.

Wednesday morning was the funeral, and it felt like one: damp and cold, just a few degrees above freezing. Still, the church was packed to overflowing, with people standing outside.

Sitting with her parents and hearing all the choked voices, Teresa made a pact with herself. *I will never commit suicide. And I will live to be eighty.*

Afterward, Alden's casket descended into the airless, root-filled darkness of Pleasant Grove City Cemetery, and everybody went home.

• • •

Later that day, the older kids gave the journal to Marcella. Reading through it, she realized how little she'd actually known about her fitful son. It wasn't just the poetry or the drawings, but the ideas. In his clumsy teenage way, Alden had been searching for something beyond himself, for another kind of life. Marcella thought about this bright, sensitive boy who had felt so alone. If she'd known all of this, would things be different now?

In 1971, people didn't talk much about depression, especially in children. (What did children have to be depressed about?) Even worse, no one seemed to listen. Marcella found that out when she talked to Alden's former psychiatrist. He was all defense, saying he hadn't realized that Alden was "truly" depressed.

• • •

The journal was short, just sixty-seven entries, and she read it over and over. Even the hurtful parts, where Alden lashed out at the Church or the family, were an ugly kind of comfort—her son's voice, preserved and safe. You could run your finger over the pages and feel the imprint.

As the days passed, her mind circled, homing in on a rough idea. Watching Alden slide toward oblivion, Doyle and Marcella had felt so isolated and trapped. They'd had no one to confide in, no one who had *been there*. It was like drifting out to sea, alone and unmissed, as darkness swallowed the sun. Maybe Alden's diary could help someone. A teen or a worried parent. It might even help the Barretts themselves.

Marcella was no writer, but she tried. The words went around in her head, stacking up in piles and drifts until she was exhausted. And wading through Alden's final months, again and again, was a special kind of hell.

For her own sake, she finally stopped trying, and she stopped reading the journal. If there was an answer, God would show her. In the meantime, she had to keep living.

The notebook went into storage, and for a while, it stayed there.

* How taboo was suicide? Doyle's medical partner, Dale Murdock (who filled out Alden's death certificate), had come to the house the night Alden died. He'd seen the gunshot wound and knew the circumstances, but instead of circling "suicide" on the paperwork, he opted for "undetermined."

To their credit, the Barretts ignored this escape hatch and disclosed the painful truth.

Carry That Weight

In the days after Alden's funeral, the bright, twisting pain in Teresa's chest was worse than before, like a heart attack that just kept going.

Someone had given her a sympathy card with a quote from the Gospel of Matthew: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

She went to her knees and prayed for relief.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Something like a ripple went through her, and the physical agony wavered. Her heart was still pounding, but the horrible jags got smaller and smaller until they were gone. And that's when the grief rushed in, full strength, filling everything to the bursting point. It was pain beyond pain, like nothing she'd ever imagined.

She started crying, and the tears came for hours.

• • •

Teresa needed something to cling to—and she needed to get away from her parents.

Even before Alden died, Barton Curtis had been hovering around, hoping to get back together. Teresa didn't click with Barton—not like she had with Alden—and she told him so, saying point-blank, "I'm not really in love with you."

Barton didn’t care. She’d *learn* to love him. Wasn’t that how it usually went?

Four months after Alden’s funeral, Teresa married Barton in a beige-on-beige chapel just eight hundred feet from the site of her midnight wedding. The *Daily Herald*’s announcement showed her in two-thirds profile, both eyes closed.

• • •

Barton’s hell-raising days, it turned out, weren’t quite over. A month after marrying Teresa, he was in court for trying to outrun a police vehicle; eight months later, the state suspended his license for “unlawful operation of a motor vehicle contributing to serious damage.” More charges followed: auto theft, eluding an officer, falsifying a registration.

Teresa stuck it out until 1975, when Barton stopped coming home. *To hell with this*, she finally thought, and filed for divorce.

Back on her own, she drifted from the Church and started smoking pot. That, and some drinking, made things easier, or at least that’s how it felt.

Now and then she talked with Marcella Barrett. They’d always gotten along, and the calls were helpful reminders. *You’re not in this alone*. But then they’d say goodbye and return to their own small prisons, with nothing ahead but time.

Ghost of a Chance

There is no right way to process a loved one's suicide, but there are millions of wrong ways. Some people fall to pieces, which makes as much sense as anything. Others clench down and try to outlast it, the misery lashing like nuclear rain. That's what therapists aim for: *Just make it through a day. Then one more.* That can work, sometimes, but not because the rain ever stops. Instead, you just learn to live with less sunshine.

This hideous murk can swallow whole families. Parents face a lifetime of self-hate and second guesses, giant red asterisks at the corner of every good moment. Marriages teeter. Siblings face a doubled risk of suicide. And the only people who truly understand can seem like awful reminders.

On the night of Alden's suicide, Doyle Barrett had pulled his children close. *I will never neglect you*, he said. *I promise.* But now everything was a horrible echo, and that included his family.

He started living in the past, a place where Alden still existed. First, he sketched headstone ideas, something to replace the grave's small marker. He settled on a slab of charcoal granite, seven hundred pounds and polished smooth, with one of Alden's poems engraved in big letters. Set into the front was a photo of Alden in a blue suit, his hair neatly combed, looking serious and handsome.

Alden Barrett's headstone as it looked in 1971. Note: this image was digitally restored to reflect the headstone's original appearance. *(Photo by Rick Emerson; original portrait of Alden Barrett by Doyle Barrett. Poem by Alden Barrett.)*

After finishing the headstone, Doyle found other ways to be absent. The easiest was to just keep working. No one expected a doctor to clock out at 5:00 PM, so he pushed it as long as he could. Home was a living morgue, and every moment away was a moment of relief. In time, he began an affair and hoped it wouldn't get back to Marcella.

Scott and Elaine, still just eleven and nine years old, didn't have jobs to go to. Their lives were home, school, and home again, breathing the same

joyless air day after day after day. Worse, they'd lost their roles in the new, reordered family. Who were they supposed to be now?

One night, as the family knelt in prayer, Doyle asked God to bless the children with some of Alden's abilities; then he started crying. Scott was frightened, but kept it to himself. *If I become like Alden*, he thought, *will I* end up *just like him?*

Inside, he replayed the final minutes again and again and again. The argument, the footsteps, the goodbye, the body, the screaming. Every time, the pain felt brand new. It never got any softer.

Elaine was an open drawer; there was no hiding her agony. Scott *seemed* better, but it was all surface. Inside, he was scratching himself to pieces, reliving the screams and the hot-penny taste of panic.

• • •

Doyle and Marcella enrolled the kids in therapy, but options were scarce, so they settled on Alden's former psychiatrist, which didn't allay Scott's fears.

They want me to take Alden's place.

For the next three years, Scott and Elaine had regular sessions with the psychiatrist, but Scott feels little was accomplished. "To this day," Scott says, "I don't recall a single word he said. I do, however, recall the feeling of how pointless and unproductive the sessions were."

So he turned inward, initially fixating on the gunshot. Why hadn't he heard the sound? It was probably a trick of acoustics, but all the same, it nagged at him. One more thing to chew on, over and over and over.

He read books about addiction and pestered Alden's friends with questions about death and mental illness. At school, he wrote essays about drug abuse and sobriety. He wanted to understand. He wanted to *fix it.*

He also wanted to fill Alden's role: the questioner, the student, the star. When that didn't get his parents' attention, he switched to Alden's *other* role: the troublemaker. By 1973, Scott—now fourteen years old—was drinking, smoking, skipping school, and disappearing for stretches of time.

Scott's behavior earned him a three-month stay at Primary Children's Hospital, supervised by Alden's former shrink. When that didn't work,

Doyle and Marcella tried a new option.

Provo Canyon School had opened in 1973, and claimed to address behavior issues “on a deeper level than possible in public schools.”

Years later, the truth would come out: Provo Canyon School was barely a “school” at all. It was a prison that ran like a black site.

But those revelations were still in the future. Doyle and Marcella sent Scott to PCS shortly before his fifteenth birthday, and he was there for more than a year.

The rest of the family drifted along, everyone in their own bubble. Doyle went to work, Elaine went to school . . . and Marcella prayed for some daylight.

• • •

Religion isn’t big on explanation. The divine plan unfolds, and your job is to follow. Through thickets of pain, you keep on moving, because there is a reason. At least there’d *better* be a reason, or someone is playing a cosmic joke at your expense. Without a reason, pain is just pain. No lesson, no greater good, no opportunity for triumph. Just dull, stupid hurt that goes on without meaning.

Marcella didn’t believe that, *couldn’t* believe that. So she kept her faith, praying and waiting for answers.

On August 14, 1977, she finally understood.

DAILY HERALD

GO ASK BEA SPARKS ALL ABOUT ALICE

> PROVO—When Bea Sparks of Provo spoke of Alice, tears welled up in her eyes. “While working in drug abuse,” she said, “I came across this little girl, who gave me her diaries. After her death, I prepared them for publication.”

Part Three

Gods and Monsters

Crossroads

For both the Barretts and Beatrice Sparks, 1971 had been a dividing line, the year when everything changed. And like the Barretts, Sparks faced a hard question: *What do I do now?*

It was a cruel irony. If *Go Ask Alice* had sold modestly in hardcover, they might have put Sparks's name on the paperback, then sent her out to do some press. But with huge numbers, why bother? *Alice* was a hit, and who was Beatrice Sparks? Just some Mormon housewife who'd gotten lucky. (After all, it wasn't like she'd *written* the diary or anything . . . right?)

The message from Prentice-Hall was clear. *Take the money and be happy. Also, quiet. Be quiet.*

• • •

Sparks pitched one thing after another. How about a self-help book for grown-ups? Or a seventies revamp of *Kids Say the Darndest Things*? How about Sparks's account of fostering a Navajo teen?*

Nothing happened.

Part of it was *Alice*. How could you follow up a game changer without falling short? But Sparks's writing had its own problems. Everything read like a first draft, with lots of flailing and repetition. Exclamation marks clogged the page, often in threes and fours; ditto for all-caps shouting.

Adjectives ran together like paper clip chains: “He is the most warm, compassionate, forgiving, loving, most understanding person in the world”; “Oh, glorious, marvelous, wonderful, incredible, fantastic day!”; “I’m such an immature, childish, impractical, improbable wishywashy.”

Worst of all was Sparks’s tone, which clucked and scolded like an angry bluebird, equal parts cheer and fury.

Alice moved fast enough to minimize this, or at least make it work. (What was a speed-addled Christian runaway *supposed* to sound like?) But stripped of the diary format, Sparks came off as a badgering, long-winded moralist.

Years slipped by, and rejections piled up, just like the bad old days. Maybe this was how it went: some freak success, then a slow, sad fade-out.

• • •

Without a book deal, Sparks had time to kill. Her children were grown, so she and LaVorn hit the road, making a large, lazy circuit of the United States. From Utah, they crossed Nevada, angled north toward San Francisco, then drove south to Los Angeles. For their final push, they cut through Texas, then headed back to Provo.

As they traveled, Beatrice and LaVorn saw a lot of young-looking drifters. Where would they all end up? There was no rainbow waiting out west, Sparks knew, just a lot of concrete and sharp-eyed vultures.

By the time she returned to Utah, Sparks was planning another book—one for which *she’d* get the credit, not some anonymous dead girl.

The new idea was simple and obvious. Why have just *one* Alice when you could have several?

• • •

Later, Sparks claimed to have interviewed more than one thousand runaways in thirty-seven cities, finally settling on four: Henry, Mark,

Millie, and Jane. They talked about drugs, and rape, and new-age cults. About the road and what it took to survive there.

Once again, there were signs that something was hinky. Phrases from *Go Ask Alice* reappeared, sometimes word for word. Of course, *Alice* had sold millions of copies, so maybe the kids were just reciting what they'd read. But maybe not, because the problems continued:

How had Sparks gotten parental permission (as she claimed) to interview anonymous runaways, some of whom never went home?

How could a strung-out teenager ("Mark") recite—from memory—a lengthy speech by Gerald Ford?

For that matter, how could Mark, whom Sparks supposedly interviewed in 1976, reference a television show that didn't air until 1977?

And . . . interviewing a *thousand* runaways?

Sparks's strategy was always the same. Admit nothing. Stick to the script. Stay on message: *It's all completely true.*

She called the new book *Go Ask Henry, Mark, and Millie.* And this time, she didn't take chances. For the pitch package, she put her name at the top, then added a large picture of her own face.

Beatrice Sparks would never be erased again.

Sure enough, the new book sold . . . to the most unlikely publisher imaginable.

---

* This was part of the Church's "Indian Placement Program," in which teenagers from regional tribes lived with Mormon families, ostensibly for the chance to attend non-reservation schools. The catch: participants had to be baptized into the Mormon faith. The program ended in the mid-1990s.

Divine Intervention

The *New York Times*.

Even as other newspapers gained in influence, the *Times* ruled them all like Zeus, its every movement and utterance freighted with power; its every gesture taken as dictum. Ethics, protocol, political heft—the *Times* was the terminal standard.

And the *Times* had money. Enough to purchase indie publisher Quadrangle, rebrand it as Times Books, and start acquiring manuscripts.

Thanks in large part to *Go Ask Alice*, the teen-crisis genre was soaring, and the New York Times Company bought Beatrice Sparks's next two books. First up was *Go Ask Henry, Mark, and Millie*, which got a new (and uninspiring) title: *VOICES*.*

Slotted for an October 1977 release, *VOICES* was soon pushed back to late 1978, but in the meantime, Sparks did what she'd been bursting to do for six long years: take credit for "editing" *Go Ask Alice*. The agreement with Prentice-Hall kept her name off *Alice*'s cover, but didn't stop her from *talking* about it, something she finally seemed to realize.

Sparks chose Provo's *Daily Herald*, a virtual house organ for Beatrice and LaVorn's social climb. It probably helped that Renee Nelson, the *Herald*'s lifestyle editor, was from Sparks's hometown of Logan, and was inclined to take her tales at face value.

Wednesday, August 24, 1977

DAILY HERALD

GO ASK BEA SPARKS ALL ABOUT ALICE

> PROVO—When Bea Sparks of Provo spoke of Alice, tears welled up in her eyes. "While working in drug abuse," she said, "I came across this little girl, who gave me her diaries. After her death, I prepared them for publication."
>
> The diaries ultimately became the bestselling and sometimes controversial book, "Go Ask Alice." The publication lays the drug scene wide open, through the eyes of a very young and often insecure child.
>
> The real Alice died just three weeks after she noted in her diary that she would no longer keep a record. So no-one can ask Alice, but in her own way, she has done what she most wanted to do, to help others not make the mistakes she made.

The next thousand words were a big, wet kiss to Beatrice Sparks, the "gentle, sensitive" editor behind a modern-day classic. *Go Ask Alice* was "a sacred trust," wrote Nelson, a trust that Sparks honored by staying anonymous (Nelson's article apparently notwithstanding). It was Alice's story, not Beatrice's, and the book's only goal was to educate.

"A psychology major, she graduated from UCLA in Los Angeles with a B.A. degree."—From "Go Ask Bea Sparks All About Alice," Daily Herald *(Provo, UT), August 14, 1977 (Photo courtesy of* Daily Herald*).*

Sparks dismissed the idea of legalizing marijuana ("that's like saying we had just as well cut off our toe, because we have already cut off our finger"), and polished her stay-at-home credentials. Despite the hit movie, and the bestselling book, and the Hollywood connections, Sparks insisted she was still just a "cookie mama."

• • •

In Pleasant Grove, Marcella Barrett read Renee Nelson's article and felt a stirring.

Marcella knew about *Go Ask Alice*—everyone did. It was still selling like mad, and the TV movie had aired several times. But it was more than

that. *Alice* had helped people.

Marcella didn’t want money. She didn’t want fame or attention. She just wanted Alden’s life to *mean* something, or his death would be unbearable.

She read the article again. Beatrice Sparks wasn’t just a fellow Mormon, she was also a mother of three, and seemed to be a psychologist. And she lived just nine miles away.

This, thought Marcella, *is the reason.*

---

* Either the uppercase spelling was meant to add excitement, or Sparks’s authorial tics just proved weirdly contagious.

From Out of Nowhere

In Provo, Beatrice Sparks listened as Marcella Barrett spoke.

. . . son, Alden . . . sixteen . . . committed suicide . . . left a diary . . . could be a book . . . like you did for Alice.

It was too good to be true.

Sons and Daughters

When the two women met, Sparks was her best, most charming self. As a fellow Saint, she could use the right words, mentioning "testimony," and "free agency," and maybe adding an "oh my heck." All the tiny threads that bind a little world.

And there was that *other* connection. Sparks's firstborn, Jimmie LaVonette, had died at just six days old, and the pain was ongoing.

It was a special kind of club, that pain. You could imagine it, but you couldn't really know it, not until it happened. And then it was too big and awful for words.

But other grieving parents? They *knew*. They spoke the same hidden language.

Sparks agreed that Alden's writing could help people, just like Alice's had. Of course, she'd need to see the full journal.

Marcella agreed to provide a copy, even the parts she found hurtful. For good or bad, it was Alden's true self, and she was willing to share it.

There was no paperwork, and no money changed hands. That was fine with Marcella: what kind of mother would want to profit from her own son's death? Sparks would get the royalties.

Sparks promised that Marcella could read the manuscript before publication. Years later, that promise would nag like an old fracture, but in the moment, Marcella felt hope.

Dr. Sparks, she thought, *is the answer to my prayers.*

• • •

When Doyle found out, he was furious. Alden's suicide was family business, and you didn't share that with strangers.

Marcella stood firm. Alden was dead, and nothing would change that. This would at least bring *meaning*. Besides, it was too late: Sparks had a copy of the journal. Marcella had given her blessing, and to her, that was as good as a contract.

Doyle stayed angry, and the rift in the marriage grew bigger.

Lost for Words

September 1978

Go Ask Alice was closing in on three million copies. To sell even a fraction of that, *VOICES* would need a ton of promotion.

Sparks did thirty-plus interviews in only six days, and that was just the California press. The New York Times Company had a big reach, and news outlets everywhere mentioned the new book from (as the front cover put it) "the woman who brought you *Go Ask Alice*."

Beatrice Sparks just prior to the release of VOICES, *1978 (Photo by Ralph S. Burton).*

It was curious phrasing (what did "brought you" mean, exactly?), but they had to mention *Alice* somehow—it was the only thing a casual shopper might notice. The cover art for *VOICES*, a joint protruding from the back pocket of someone's blue jeans, had all the shock value of a Bee Gees poster.

Print ads, meanwhile, hyped the underage-smut factor:

> They cried 'Mommy, Daddy' in the dark. Or yelled obscenities from mouths that still wore braces.
>
> They said love in a language you never learned.
>
> Listen as they tell of the lives of four teenagers. What it's like to have sex at thirteen, to be stoned at dinner and your parents don't notice, to turn your sister on to amphetamines, to be deprogrammed from a cult.*

VOICES seemed a sure winner. Except that it was terrible.

By 1978, authors like Judy Blume and Robert Cormier had perfected the young adult genre, giving blunt, relatable voice to teenage turmoil.

Blume, who had just turned forty, was especially skilled, with a style so natural it verged on invisible. From the very first reading, her books felt like old, familiar friends.

Alice had that, too, in its own feverish way, with a manic confusion that shook the page. *VOICES*, on the other hand, was both lengthy and grating, like a cross-country drive with motormouthed coworkers.

VOICES was essentially four *Alice*-style narratives, each presented as a single, unbroken monologue—supposedly the "answer" half of a lengthy Q&A with Sparks. Where were the questions? Who knew? Instead of a back-and-forth interview, readers got four very, *very* long soliloquies from four interchangeable teens, all of whom sounded like Beatrice Sparks.

This led to scores of awkward setups, with teens repeating Sparks's questions for the benefit of readers. Take the passage in which one runaway, Jane, bumps into Sparks several months after their first interview:

> Oh wow! I didn't think I'd ever see you again. Sure, I'd like to go out to lunch with you. Meet you in front at one minute after twelve.

Or:

> Do I like being a beauty operator? Not especially, but I blew the education bit by trying to be so 'with-it' when I was young.

Still, many reviewers went along, describing *VOICES* as "nonfiction" and treating it like serious research. After all, who was going to challenge the New York Times Company?

One of the few outliers was *School Library Journal*, which published multiple scathing assessments.

"Beatrice Sparks, author of *Go Ask Alice*, claims to have interviewed over 1000 teenagers in 37 cities before settling on the four included in this contrived, melodramatic book," began a review by Linda Serafini, a Boston librarian. "All are remarkably similar, and speaking in the first person, they sound nearly identical. A major disappointment."

A few weeks later, Alameda County librarian Elizabeth J. Talbot hit the same angles.

“The teenagers are not believable; they seem to be merely vehicles for Sparks’s theorizing,” wrote Talbot. “Statements regarding gays are blatantly damaging. Such melodramatic, superficial coverage of crucial issues perpetrates stereotypes and can be misleading.”*

Talbot ended with a terse, “Not recommended.”

• • •

Despite the press, and the *Alice* tie-in, and the underage lesbian romps, *VOICES* was a disaster. A spate of reviews, a nationwide yawn, and then nothing. Sparks’s comeback faded from sight.

But as she’d always done, Sparks pushed ahead. In fact, her next release was only a few weeks away.

It was a posthumous diary, just like *Alice*, but its author was a teenage boy.

Sparks called him “Jay.”

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* *VOICES’* paperback edition aimed even lower. “Millie: Lost, lonely, she thought she found love when her junior high school teacher initiated her into the secrets of lesbian sex.”

* Where *Alice* had its “sadistic switch hitters” and “low class queers,” *VOICES* chose the run-on-sentence approach, at one point describing gays as “fruits, fairies, queers, yucks, shits, and filths.”

Teenage Frankenstein

January 1979

Marcella Barrett was out shopping. A friend spotted her, came over, and said the strangest thing.

"So, you've got a book out."

What? Marcella hadn't written a book. What did—

"*Jay's Journal*," said the friend.

Marcella was lost. What in the world was *Jay's Journal*? Was that the book about Alden? No, it couldn't be. Dr. Sparks had promised to let her read it first.

Marcella gave some sort of answer, just playing it off, and went back to her shopping.

Later, a bigger question occurred to her. If it *was* the book about Alden, how had her friend *known* that?

Jay's Journal seemed to be sold out everywhere, but when Marcella finally got a copy, she only made it through a few pages before her stomach lurched.

• • •

The cover wasn't exactly subtle: a pentagram with a human skull inside it, then some big block letters.

JAY'S JOURNAL
The Haunting Diary of a
16-Year-Old in the World of Witchcraft
Edited by BEATRICE SPARKS, who brought you *Go Ask Alice*.

From the introduction:

> At 7 AM January 3, 1978, a very distressed mother phoned. She said she had read an article about how I had prepared *Go Ask Alice* from an existing diary, and *VOICES*, not then released, from personal interviews; how I hoped both books would help educate young people as to the problems and pressures and weaknesses of their peers, and make it easier for them to consider alternatives and make wise decisions in their own lives.
>
> The lady said her son, Jay, had kept a journal—a seminary book—and many papers and letters, which she felt could be of benefit to both kids and parents looking for answers and a way out.
>
> Jay, 16 1/2 years old, had been into witchcraft, how deeply neither his mother nor his father had ever suspected, until after Jay put his father's pistol against his right temple and pulled the trigger.

Like *Alice*, *Jay's Journal* was a diary; 212 entries spanning eighteen months.

"Jay" is a fifteen-year-old boy living in the small, religious town of "Apple Hill." Jay is bright and well liked; he gets good grades, says his prayers, and has a lot of friends.

Things go south when Jay's girlfriend, Debbie, gets him high. Soon, he moves on to pills, booze, and anything else he can find. Along with two close friends, Dell and Brad, Jay spends his days wasted and worthless.

In a bid to straighten him out, Jay's parents send him to a local boys academy, but that makes things worse. A pair of academy students, Pete and Kurt, introduce Jay to witchcraft. Using a Ouija board, the boys talk to

ghosts and practice spellcasting, a habit Jay continues when he returns to Apple Hill High School.

After Debbie breaks up with him, Jay mopes for a while, but then he meets Tina. Their connection is immediate and soul deep, and overnight, they fall in love. When Jay learns that Tina is *also* into black magic, it only brings them closer. Witchcraft, Jay learns, is everywhere, spreading through teen society like a dark, delicious whisper.

At a late-night orgy on the far side of town, Jay and Tina drink a drug-laced potion, then rip into each other, fucking with insane, bloody passion.

Soon, disaster strikes. Jay is busted for marijuana and downers. Slapped with house arrest, he decides to abandon witchcraft, but Tina lures him deeper in, and the couple seals their bond at a midnight wedding in the local graveyard. The ceremony is all blasphemous lust: at the moment of "I do," Tina and Jay slice each other's tongues and kiss, letting the blood mix, then one of the guests pulls out a small, mewing kitten and snaps its neck.

Jay's downward slide is fast and violent. He pulls his best friends, Brad and Dell, into black magic, taking them along on hideous, crime-filled joyrides. One night, the trio goes searching for something to kill or maim. At a nearby farm, they mutilate a cow, cutting out its eyes, tongue, and genitals. They fill a bucket with the dying animal's blood, and Jay drinks it. Later, all three teens are baptized in a mixture of blood and urine.

Through it all, Jay's family is mostly oblivious. They know *something* is wrong, but they chalk it up to teen angst or maybe girl problems. Jay's younger brother, Chad, sees a scarier truth. "You're not Jay anymore," the little boy says. "You don't act like Jay."

Once again, Jay renounces witchcraft, but the decision costs him. Tina, his deviant soul mate, dumps him for someone else.

A few nights later, a shadowy figure appears in Jay's bedroom. This is "Raul," a demon who wants Jay's body for his own. All those bloody deeds, all that sexual carnage, it was the demon, using Jay like a human taxi, steering him this way and that, always further down, always toward evil.

The demon vanishes, and Jay is terrified—for himself, his family, his friends. What will happen to them?

He soon finds out. Dell and Brad die in separate accidents just days apart, and Jay is swallowed by guilt. It's his fault. He brought them into this, and now they're gone.

Their deaths are the final straw. Jay makes an appointment with his bishop and plans to come clean about the occult, whatever the cost. The bishop will surely be able to help him.

But on January 22, 1977, Jay weakens . . . and kills himself with his father's pistol.

The book ends with Jay's suicide note, followed by a pair of letters from Jay's mother: one to a friend of Jay's, the other to the book's readers.

"We knew he was unhappy about a few things and tried to help him all we could," says part of the first letter, "but Jay really masked his feelings to the point that he fooled all of us."

• • •

Reading *Jay's Journal*, the Barretts' confusion turned to shock, then fury. This *was* Beatrice Sparks's book about Alden, and she'd made him into a monster.

Sparks had used two dozen entries from Alden's journal, sometimes word for word, then added more than 190 *new* entries, including all of the violent and occult material. But the book didn't say that. Instead, everything was attributed to "Jay." And Sparks? Oh, she was just the *editor*.

Throughout the book, Alden's real-life words lurked like sad little cameos, usually flanked by gruesome nonsense. Sparks had, for example, used Alden's September 24, 1970, passage, in which he glows about Teresa:

> Well things are looking up! Yes, things may be getting better. I might be finding someone 'to see.' Yeah, things are looking up. I just might ask her to the debate party if things go right. Well there are times . . . there certainly are times. . . .
>
> The vibrations have struck home—someone grown up, someone of my kind. Someone real. An individual, an understanding ear, a seeing eye, an open mind. Living, breathing, walking, talking, listening, loving, holding.

A few pages later, the bright-eyed couple are fucking at a gore-splattered orgy:

> I hit her and kicked her and mauled her, sex was not enough, I wanted to hurt her! After what seemed hours the drug wore off. The people came back into place in the circle.
>
> Panting and groaning, I was led back to mine. Tina crawled over and gathering blood from her cuts on her fingers she placed it in my mouth. ‘Master, Master, Master,’ she whispered over and over. I was too groggy to do anything more than swallow.

Elsewhere, Sparks used Alden’s entry from October 17, 1970—two weeks before the midnight wedding:

> But of more importance, Teresa and I finally came to grips about our relationship. I love her and she loves me. That’s all there is to it except that our minds are still growing and this may cause a hassle, but what will be will be.
>
> A happiness, a hopelessness, two children on the wing
> A loving look, a storybook, and sacred hymns to sing.
>
> I have invested my heart. There is a chance that it will be broken but also a chance at unlimited happiness.

But in Sparks’s hands, the gentle, flower child ritual became a literal marriage from hell:

> By the single little black candle, which we certainly didn’t need for light, we went through the ritual of eternal slavery to each other although I, the male, would always technically be the master. Then we each cut our tongues and let the blood pour into each other’s mouths. It was Nirvana. We were one!
>
> When the chanting started Martin brought in a teensy mewing kitten. With one twist he wrung its little neck.

Elsewhere, Sparks pilfered the news for inspiration. In early 1978, as Sparks worked on *Jay's Journal*, California police had arrested schizophrenic serial killer Richard Chase, who, the papers reported, had once been detained for roaming Lake Tahoe, lugging a bucket of cow's blood.

Around the same time, fringe conspiracists had latched onto "cattle mutilation," the widespread killing and/or maiming of livestock by (take your pick): extraterrestrials, government agents, the Chupacabra, or [other].

Sparks neatly merged the two stories, creating a new and repugnant explanation. The cattle, confessed "Jay" in his posthumous diary, had been savaged by teenage Satanists.

> First we siphoned off the blood from a careful tiny slash in a vein, put it into gobs of gallon jars we'd ripped off from the A&W and the caterers, trying not to spill a drop. It would be used as part of a ritual when we returned home. Mel, like a surgeon, cut out the eyes, tongue, and balls. Then we had to go for another animal.
>
> . . . each organ was immediately sealed in a fruit jar, and whisked off to the van . . . the bull smelled like nothing I'd ever smelled before and made strange gurgling sounds in his throat and belly even though he was dead.

And that wasn't the worst of it.

Cruel Intentions

Like *Go Ask Alice*, *Jay's Journal* began with a disclaimer:

> Times, places, names, and some details have been changed to protect the privacy and identity of Jay's family members and friends.

If privacy was Sparks's goal, she failed in spectacular fashion. Many entries weren't changed at all, even when they pointed to Utah County.*

Of the changes Sparks *did* make, many were borderline useless. Pleasant Grove High's annual "Sweater Swing" dance became the "Sweater Fling" dance, and local restaurant the Purple Turtle became "The Blue Moo."

Certain changes were so unhelpful, they felt like a morbid game of word search. In choosing a pseudonym for Alden's Sunday School teacher, Sparks (whose options were *literally infinite*) opted for "Niels"—just one letter off from Alden's middle name, Niel.

It didn't stop there. While "editing" the diary, Beatrice Sparks had several discussions with Marcella, getting a feel for Alden's life and social group. At the time, it seemed reasonable; Sparks wanted to understand Alden's world, and Marcella was glad to help. But Sparks sprinkled those details throughout *Jay's Journal*, adding clues where none had existed.

For anyone in Pleasant Grove (or Utah County, for that matter), figuring out Jay's real name would be a snap, and once you had that, the rest would

follow. “Tina” was Teresa Blain. “Brad” and “Dell” were two of Alden’s closest friends, Mike Waid and John Lundgren. (Even here, Sparks hinted like a neon sign. She gave pseudonyms to Alden’s friends John, Mike, and Kim, then added a *separate* trio of pals named—wait for it—John, Mike, and Kim.)*

Some additions seemed designed for maximum pain. When Alden wrote, “What do you know about love, fat hog?” (October 20, 1970), he was clearly pissed off at *someone*, but there’s no telling whom. Devoid of context, it could have been anybody. Sparks rewrote the passage to specifically target Marcella:

> Oh Mom—you’re such a fat gross-out loser! What do you know about love, fat hog?

For *Jay*’s epilogue, Sparks reprinted a letter that Marcella had sent to one of Alden’s friends shortly after the suicide. A hurt and bewildered attempt at explanation from a woman still knee-deep in shock, it read, in part:

> We do feel that Jay had lived a pretty full life in his short 16 1/2 years because he had tremendous abilities and was such an intense person. He was a very deep thinker and was so far ahead in his intelligence that I’m sure he will advance much faster with his Heavenly Father than he could on this earth. He was a very choice child on earth and we were so happy to have had him with us for the 16 1/2 years that we did.

For anyone who knew Marcella, the letter sealed things; it was her language to a T. Coming in *Jay*’s final pages, it seemed to endorse the entire book. Sparks had made Marcella complicit.

• • •

The Barretts were sick with anger, but weren't sure how to respond. The book was already out; people were buying it, taking it home, passing it around.

Scott wanted some kind of action. Maybe a lawsuit, or a public statement. Anything but silence.

Doyle and Marcella disagreed. They were old-fashioned, and thought lawsuits were sleazy. Decent people didn't drag lawyers into personal affairs. As for a public statement, Doyle hadn't wanted to share Alden's diary in the first place, and he certainly didn't want any *more* attention.

Scott protested, but Doyle and Marcella held firm. *Why fan the flames? Just let it vanish. Besides, this book is crazy. Possessed house cats. Levitation. Who could believe such nonsense?*

The answer, it turned out, was *lots* of people.

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* Alden had briefly interned at local radio station KOVO, and Sparks kept the reference intact, including the station's call letters. Even in a pre-internet era, that one detail was enough to decode everything else, revealing Pleasant Grove as the real-life "Apple Hill."

* In the decade following Alden's suicide, Mike Waid and John Lundgren had died in separate traffic accidents: Waid in 1971, Lundgren in 1976. To fit *Jay's* narrative, Sparks changed this chronology by several years *and* linked both deaths to witchcraft.

Faith in the Devil

Sunday, April 8, 1979

"This terrifying journal is not fiction," began the review in Sunday's *Chattanooga Times*. "It's edited from the real journal of a 16-year-old, and it's a book that parents should read."

The reviewer, Stan Gillespie, had a master's in literature, and chaired the English department at a Tennessee prep school, where he specialized in the works of William Faulkner. He was also a devout Christian, and he embraced *Jay*'s premise without hesitation.

> The book's value is that it argues the possibility of a real occult terror in schools, an insidious power that can entice a youngster down a one-way road to fragmentation and death.
>
> This is a book that parents of young children should read.

At Alabama's *Anniston Star,* Barbara Hall reviewed *Jay* with equal credulity:

> It was Jay's mother herself who set professional counselor and bestselling author Beatrice Sparks to work on this heartbreaking little book, excerpted from the diary of a 16-year-old boy who

> killed himself after some months of contact with practitioners of the occult.
>
> Similar in style to the devastating *Go Ask Alice*, the real-life journal of a young drug addict, this new book is the same vivid picture of a mind in torment.

Writing in the *Fresno Bee*, reviewer Alan Lott described Jay's "helpless plunge into witchcraft" before adding, "It's hard to remember the book is not fiction."

• • •

Powerful trade magazine *Publishers Weekly* had set the tone months earlier, reviewing *Jay's Journal* just prior to Christmas 1978:

> This is a compelling document, more mesmerizing than fiction, with implications too frightening to forget. Parents of teenagers, no matter how rational and skeptical they may be, must read this journal with a gnawing fear about what their own children may be experiencing and concealing. (Sparks previously edited *Go Ask Alice*.)

Speaking to the *Minneapolis Star*'s Jim Adams, Beatrice Sparks described her edits as "deleting a few accounts about household chores, adding a few clarifying words, and correcting punctuation." The real work, it seemed, had been facing down the forces of evil:

> Sparks said she confirmed accounts in the diary by talking with teenagers mentioned in the diary. And she saw them demonstrate occult mental powers by straightening bobby pins, pulling a spoon across a table, and levitating a pocket notebook in a restaurant.
>
> "I felt all over for strings," said Sparks, a drug counselor. "It puts goose bumps on me just to talk about it. I don't understand it, but it works."

Linger on that for a moment. Beatrice Sparks, speaking on record to a mainstream reporter, claimed that a bunch of kids in Pleasant Grove sat across from her, in a restaurant, and *levitated a notebook*.

Did Jim Adams, who had a master's degree in journalism, take issue with this?

He did not. Nor did he strike a neutral position. Rather, he spent twelve paragraphs recounting Jay's "journey into an evil world of witches' covens, orgies, animal sacrifice, [and] blood baptism." Then, for good measure, Adams identified Jay as "a 16-year-old youth from a small community near Provo," a detail he likely got from Sparks herself.*

Of all the early reviews, the most damning praise came from the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, a small but influential newspaper aimed at college faculty and administrators.

Writing just three months after the Jonestown massacre, in which nine hundred cult members—including countless children—had committed ritual suicide in South America, *Chronicle* reviewer Allen Lacy praised *Jay*'s "ring of authenticity and truth," adding, "in reading *Jay's Journal*, I was constantly reminded of what happened in Guyana."

Alden Barrett, eight years dead, had now been tacitly compared to Jim Jones, the architect of a thousand-person slaughter.

• • •

Not everyone was so blinkered. A handful of critics found *Jay's Journal* not just ludicrous, but actively loathsome.

"Occasionally a YA book comes along which is so deplorable one does not know whether to ignore it (and hope not too many people notice it) or to attack it," began Sheila Schwartz's review in the *High/Low Report*, a newsletter focused on at-risk/struggling readers.

The *High/Low Report* had been one of the few outlets to question *Alice*'s authenticity, and Schwartz, a professor of English education, took the same tack with *Jay's Journal*:

> On the cover it says, “edited by Beatrice Sparks.” Inside, the author credit is “by Beatrice Sparks.” Has Sparks edited a real journal or made one up? The same confusion existed with Sparks’ previous overrated work, *Go Ask Alice.*
>
> In blurring the distinction between fiction and nonfiction, it comes off simultaneously as fraudulent and idiotic.

Jay’s Journal was, Schwartz concluded, “a disgrace.”

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* Even if you accepted *Jay*’s plot at face value, Sparks’s claim of mere “editing” didn’t hold up. At one point, *Jay’s Journal* quotes a real-life news article (“Voodoo in Africa and the United States,” by Ken Golden), which first appeared in December 1977—eleven months after Jay supposedly died.

Don’t Believe the Truth

So there you are, standing in the bookstore, looking at the new releases. Fiction, nonfiction, memoir, anthology—how can you tell them apart?

At first, it seems easy. Check the back cover, or maybe the spine, or that inside page with all the tiny print.

But what if the book is unlabeled, like the Prentice-Hall hardcover of *Go Ask Alice*?

What if there’s no “fiction” or “nonfiction” label, but the cover says “a real diary,” like the *Alice* paperbacks?

Here’s a good one: What if the front cover says “a real diary,” the spine says “autobiography,” and the inside page says “fiction”? Avon’s 1982 edition of *Alice* is printed exactly that way, with zero explanation.

What if the labels disappear again (as they did a decade later), leaving just “a real diary” and “Anonymous,” with no other info?

Ah—but maybe you live in the internet era, and information is yours for the asking. *Seek, and ye shall find.* You go online, search the Library of Congress database, and find the entry for *Go Ask Alice.*

“Fiction.”

Bam! Case closed.

Except, wait, because here’s a *second* Library of Congress entry for *Go Ask Alice*, and this one says “not fiction.” That’s the actual designation: “*not* fiction.”

You look again. Is it a different book with the same title? No, it’s the very same *Go Ask Alice.*

So now, for this *one* book, there are two conflicting Library of Congress entries, a hardcover with no information, millions of paperbacks saying “a real diary,” and at least one edition that doesn’t even agree with itself.

What the hell is going on here?

• • •

In the United States, where products must accurately disclose their contents, books are a towering exception. It’s essentially an honor system, and like any honor system, it only governs the people who don’t need it.

The outcome is about what you’d expect, only worse. Authors and publishers lie with casual frequency, pushing fiction as fact and vice versa. At times, they omit the labels entirely, leaving readers—of whatever age—to simply *guess* at a book’s veracity.

Not that the labels are really much use. Terms like “fiction” and “memoir” are just marketing handles, with no fixed meaning or legal weight, and there’s no real penalty for lying, especially for publishers, who are typically indemnified by contract. There might be some bad press, but that’s mostly a problem for authors; customers don’t care who published a book.

Even honest writers can be tarred by this process. Reprints, paperbacks, foreign editions, e-books—all require some kind of revamp and pass through dozens of hands in the process. Before long, a book originally labeled “fiction” is “inspirational,” or “memoir,” or whatever sold well last quarter.

• • •

In a pinch, you can always consult the Library of Congress, whose catalog is the closest thing to definitive.*

But even those entries are unreliable; not necessarily *wrong*, but nothing you’d want to bet the mortgage on.

Catalogers and librarians—who are truly among the world's unsung heroes—generally do their best to stay objective when classifying new materials. In cataloging lingo, they call this "presenting the book as the book presents itself," and it means taking the claims at face value. If a book purports to be nonfiction, you file it under nonfiction, whatever your own suspicions.

On occasion, a cataloger will overrule an author's (or publisher's) wishes, classifying an alleged memoir as "fiction," or noting that *Author X* is actually *Author Y* writing under a pseudonym. Likewise, if a book stays in print long enough, it might change publishers, or get an expanded anniversary edition, or be adapted into a graphic novel—any of which might require a new entry by a different cataloger, who might have a different approach. This is how the same book can end up with multiple (and conflicting) "official" entries, à la *Go Ask Alice*.

But those are exceptions. In most cases, librarians and catalogers take authors and publishers at their word and classify books accordingly. Which would be fine if authors and publishers could simply be trusted. But, of course, they can't.

• • •

Which brings us to *Jay's Journal*.

Take a deep breath, then try to work through the following:

Jay clearly isn't a true story, but big *chunks* of it are real—real enough to find the actual house, the actual gravesite, the actual family still trying to cope. The suicide note is real. The letter from "Jay's" mother is real. Most of the characters can be directly traced to actual people—some of them still alive and breathing. And it holds two dozen of Alden Barrett's diary entries, many of them largely unchanged.

Across the country, reviewers treated *Jay* as authentic, often explicitly saying, "This book is not fiction." *Jay*'s publisher, Times Books, was apparently fine with this, and made no effort to stop or correct it.

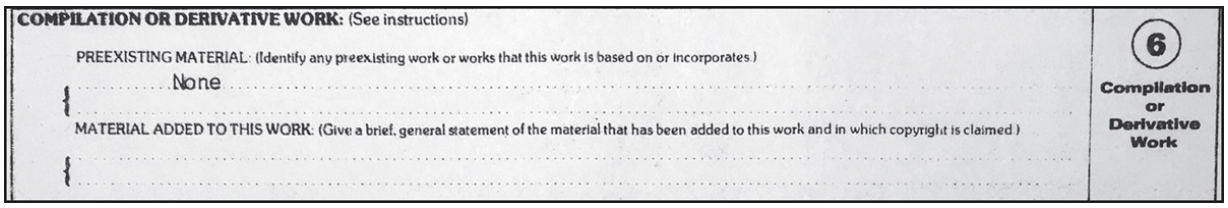
Jay's copyright page, however, says "fiction," and the Library of Congress initially filed it under "witchcraft" (later moving it to

"criminology," which makes even less sense).

Beatrice Sparks, meanwhile, presented the book as gospel truth. In every interview and promo blurb, she flatly declared it: *Jay really existed, and this is his story.*

And, sure enough, at Sparks's home in Provo, she had a copy of Alden's journal, along with notes from Marcella, letters from Alden's friends, and more, much of which ended up in the finished book.

And yet . . . on *Jay*'s federal copyright application (the paperwork filed with the US government), both Beatrice Sparks and Times Books stated point-blank that *Jay's Journal* contained *no* preexisting material.


COMPILATION OR DERIVATIVE WORK: (See instructions)

PREEXISTING MATERIAL: (Identify any preexisting work or works that this work is based on or incorporates.)

None

MATERIAL ADDED TO THIS WORK: (Give a brief, general statement of the material that has been added to this work and in which copyright is claimed.)

6 Compilation or Derivative Work

From the federal copyright application for Jay's Journal *as filed by the New York Times Company (Courtesy of Library of Congress, Copyright Office).*

The whole thing was, in other words, a massive, misleading clusterfuck —one that was almost impossible to unravel.*

In most industries, this would be a shitstorm. In publishing, it's barely an anecdote, and that's the real warning. When obvious fraud no longer rates *attention*, let alone rebuke, things get ugly fast, and even good people can believe the very worst.

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* The tiny-print info on a book's copyright page (the ISBN number, one-sentence summary, Dewey Decimal number, etc.) is called the "Cataloging-in-Publication data block," and comes from the Library of Congress. CiP data blocks are time-savers for publishers, who would otherwise have to send the info to every individual library and bookseller in the nation, but it's an all-or-nothing deal: the publisher can omit the data block entirely, but can't change it.

* *Jay*'s copyright application was signed and submitted by Pamela A. Lyons, the production editor at Times Books. Lyons's work on *Jay's Journal* was aided by assistant editor Joanna Ekman. Both Lyons and Ekman declined to speak with me. (Or so I infer: Pamela Lyons's husband screened her incoming calls, but always promised to "give her the message." Joanna Ekman received my interview requests, including one she had to sign for, but never responded at all, even to say *bug off*.)

Everybody Knows

Scott Barrett was barely nineteen when the stories started. Like the one about a secret chamber underneath Pleasant Grove High, where covens gathered for spellcasting. Or about the green light that surrounded Jay's tombstone. Or about Jay's long-ago plans to dose the town's water with LSD.

Sometimes the stories were about Jay, and sometimes they were about Alden. Sometimes it was a mix, with the teller adding, "His real name was Alden Barrett. He lived on 550 South."

What to do? Step in and say something? *Hey, he was my brother. None of that's true.* But that would only prompt strange looks and all kinds of questions. So he'd usually let it pass.

• • •

Alden's little sister, Elaine, had worked to process his death, doing years of therapy with Alden's former psychiatrist. At Pleasant Grove High, she made the honor roll and landed roles in several plays and musicals. By the time she started her junior year in 1978, it looked like the past might really stay buried.

Then *Jay's Journal* appeared.

For Elaine's final stretch at PGHS, whispers trailed her like hungry cats. Even the silences were telling—the sudden gaps of halted gossip.

She kept smiling and kept walking. *One day at a time.*

Midway through her senior year, Elaine married a man named Mike. He was twenty-two, tall, good looking, and in the Naval Reserve. By then, Elaine was two days shy of eighteen and nearly done with high school. The week of her wedding, *Jay* came out in paperback, but at least she had someone to lean on.

When graduation came, everyone passed around yearbooks, signing their names and pledging eternal friendship. And there, on the very last page, was a recap of the year's biggest stories:

- In Olympic Hockey, the USA stunned the world by upsetting Russia, 4–3 and then winning the Gold by beating Finland, 4–2.
- January's record snowfall lasted two weeks and then the rains came. Areas of Utah were flooded but Southern California and Arizona were hardest hit.
- *Jay's Journal*, the story of Alden Barrett, former PGHS student, was widely read during February and March. The book was taken from Alden's personal journal.

• • •

Things started appearing at Alden's gravesite. Sometimes notes or graffiti, sometimes just trash. Neighbors complained that the grave was a nuisance; it attracted too much attention.

The Barretts tried to keep the headstone clean. That got harder when someone put a pair of black candles on top and burned them all the way down, the wax running into every crack and crevice.

No sooner had they scraped it away than it happened again. This time, the wax was red and drippy and slightly viscous. Almost like it wasn't wax at all.

Scott obsessed, checking the headstone every few days. At one point, he noticed a kid who always seemed to be there. He was young—maybe sixteen—and he sat close to the tombstone, sometimes leaning forward to touch it, tracing his hands over Alden's photo.

Scott struck up a conversation, and things took a weird turn. The kid had some kind of homemade shrine to Alden, and apparently even prayed to it. That was enough. Scott steered him to a psychiatrist.

• • •

After failing to save Alden, the Barretts now faced another horror: his rebranding as evil incarnate.

Atheists and skeptics could roll their eyes, but they were—and are—a minority. At the turn of the twenty-first century, according to a Gallup poll, 68 percent of Americans believed the Devil was a literal, sentient being, with another 12 percent calling it "possible."*

In Utah County, circa 1979, the number was more than 90 percent. In that setting, Alden's misdeeds—his drug use and arrest, his long hair, his comments about the Church—made a horrible retrospective sense.

Six years earlier, *The Exorcist* had struck many Americans as utterly plausible, cementing their fear of demonic possession. Now it was happening again, with one major difference. The girl in *The Exorcist* had been taken over, possessed against her will. Jay, on the other hand, had sought out the darkness. Jay had *asked for it.*

To some people, that made him a monster. To some, it made him an outlaw. And to many, it just made him magnetic.

Kids, especially students from Pleasant Grove Junior High, began visiting Alden's grave. It was mostly a pose, a way to show off for each other and themselves, but there was also morbid curiosity, a normal part of any young life.

Every town has at least one of these spots. The house where all those people died. The bridge where that woman threw her kids off. The park where that guy hung himself. Serial killers and rock stars, in particular, have littered the planet with death sites, spawning countless books, films, and podcasts all predicated on the same basic idea: going there, standing there, *being* there.

For most people, the obsession peaks in adolescence, when it overlaps with other emerging needs: showing courage, breaking taboos, standing out

from the crowd.

Sometimes, a visit isn't enough. Sometimes there are rituals.

Teenagers in DeKalb, Texas, drive to the Mud Creek Bridge, then honk three times. If they do it right, they're supposed to see an "eerie blue glow" and hear the sound of crying babies. In Mattapoisett, Massachusetts, it's Wolf Island Road, where, if you blink your headlights, another set of headlights will blink back at you, or perhaps a phantom car will roar past. No one's quite sure, and it doesn't really matter. It's the *going* that matters. It's the *doing* that matters. Belief is largely irrelevant.

Adults forget this, of course. They forget it even while packing up the kids to visit Grandma's headstone. Why not mourn at home, or in front of Grandma's old condo? *And why does Grandma need flowers?*

It's a strange bit of hardwiring, this fascination with death. Strange, but mostly harmless, so long as we're honest about it. It's when we lie that things go to hell.

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* And those were only the bottom-line figures. If you looked closer, the numbers went up. Seventy percent of Catholics believed in the Devil; for Protestants, it was 79 percent. Liberals were more skeptical than conservatives, but even so, 67 percent of Democrats (the alleged "party of science") believed in the Devil as a physical creature, as did 55 percent of postgraduates and 68 percent of college graduates overall.

Nemesis

September 1979

Alleen Pace Nilsen was lost in a tangle of side roads, dead ends, and bumpy construction sites. Who knew Provo could be such a labyrinth?

It was well after dark, which didn't help. Nilsen was interviewing Beatrice Sparks the next day, and wanted to find the house in advance. For an hour, she drove back and forth without success. Then, out of nowhere, it loomed up, big as a castle and lit by the moon.

There were six massive pillars and a dozen windows. On the second floor, a chandelier glowed through stained glass. Out front, a marble statue sat in the center of a lush green lawn, all of it flanked by a wide, circular driveway and a wrought iron fence.

Nilsen just stared.

Why, it's the house that Alice built.

• • •

Alleen Nilsen had been in grad school when *Go Ask Alice* swept through teenage culture, as common as bell sleeves or flat-ironed hair. By late 1979,

Nilsen was an associate professor at Arizona State's Department of Library Science, and *Alice* was a juggernaut. *Two million copies sold. Three million copies sold. Available in sixteen languages. Now in its forty-third printing.*

And what about Alice herself? Was she really a teenage girl? Maybe a ghostwriting collective? Something else entirely?

When Nilsen spotted a copy of *VOICES*, the front-cover credit jumped out: "From Beatrice Sparks, the author who brought you *Go Ask Alice*." Checking the author bio, Nilsen saw that Beatrice Sparks—whoever she was—lived in Provo, just a day's drive from Tempe.

After a few false starts, Nilsen got Sparks on the phone and asked about an interview. No agent, no middleman, just a call and a question: How about Saturday?

Sparks said yes, a decision she would come to regret.

• • •

On Saturday, Nilsen parked her car and stepped into the cool, dry Provo air. Her teenage daughter, Nicolette, was along for the trip, and they took another long look at Sparks's house. Even in the daylight, it was imposing.

Beatrice Sparks's sixteen-room home in Provo (Photo courtesy of Nicolette Wickman).

Nilsen rang the front bell, and after a moment, the door whuffed open. There was Beatrice Sparks, in large tinted glasses and a puffy blouse, her hair a golden bouffant.

If the outside of the house was imposing, the inside was startling, even creepy.

Everything was blood red with stray white accents. Walls, ceilings, carpets, marble flooring, staircase—all had the palette of a stop sign. The only twist was a buff-colored poodle with its own matching rug.

Sparks showed off the house, taking them down the hall to the music room. Red walls, of course, plus two red love seats and a small white chair. All on red carpet. It was like being inside a velvet oven. How could you live here?

In the main room was Sparks's pride: a bookcase once owned by the Prophet Brigham Young. Three full shelves brimmed with different editions

of Sparks's books, including *Jay's Journal*. The covers faced outward for maximum viewing.

(Photo courtesy of Nicolette Wickman.)

What would Alden Barrett have made of all this? Portions of his diary, including his screeds against authority, bound and displayed on Brigham Young's furniture?

Nilsen's daughter snapped a few photos, then Nilsen and Sparks sat down for the interview.

Up to this point, Sparks had been lucky. When she claimed to be a psychologist, the local papers went along. When she came forward as *Alice*'s "editor," the *Daily Herald* did everything but canonize her.

Promoting *VOICES* and *Jay's Journal*, Sparks had used professional bookers, landing softball interviews with passive reporters. None of them pushed back or played gotcha; they asked the right questions and said the right things.

Then there was Sparks's luckiest break: being deleted from *Go Ask Alice*.

Had her name stayed on the cover, she would have done the media circuit, and that might have sabotaged everything.

You told the Spokesman-Review *that Alice died six months later, but you told the* Florence News *that it was two weeks later. What gives?*

Or:

Did you graduate from UCLA? Really? What year? [long pause] Hello?

Disaster.

Instead, she was forcibly shielded, and *Alice* evaded scrutiny. By the time Sparks went public, the danger had seemingly passed.

• • •

Professor Alleen Pace Nilsen (left) interviews Beatrice Sparks (right) for School Library Journal, *autumn 1979 (Photo courtesy of Nicolette Wickman).*

Nilsen, immensely likable and ferociously smart, asked about Sparks's credentials. Sparks ducked the question.

Nilsen circled back, referencing the dust jacket for *VOICES* ("Beatrice Sparks has been working as a professional counselor with troubled kids since 1955"). Where did Sparks train? Sparks lapsed into one of her stories about working at a drug rehab. Nilsen asked about the clinic. Sparks deflected, talking about the need for counseling and about her own deep connection with teens.

That gave Nilsen a segue. What was the story behind *Go Ask Alice*? How had it really come together?

Sparks unspooled the same basic tale: the youth convention, the call from a counselor, the hysterical teen, the ongoing friendship, the diary. The urge to share Alice's story with others.

Going into the interview, Nilsen had believed Alice was real, or close to real. A friend in the publishing world had said Alice's parents threatened a lawsuit, and that's why the book was anonymous. According to Sparks, however, it was all to connect with young readers.

"Oh, there were many reasons for publishing it anonymously," she told Nilsen, "but my reason was for the kids."

Even to Nilsen, a fellow Mormon, this sounded a little glossy. Didn't Sparks want the credit for such a colossal smash? Sparks said it wasn't about ego, or becoming rich and famous. It was about making a difference.

By then, things were winding down. Nilsen and her daughter said their goodbyes and headed back to Tempe. It was a long, dusty drive, and even the arches of southern Utah got boring. Nicolette had a copy of *VOICES* and kept trying to read it, but the book was a snore. She finally gave up and returned to *Go Ask Alice*. That never got old.

• • •

Published in *School Library Journal*'s October 1979 issue, Nilsen's article, "The House That Alice Built," was fair and objective, which may have been the problem.

Nilsen didn't pile on, but she also didn't lie. When Sparks evaded a question, Nilsen said so. And Sparks evaded repeatedly, using dodgy words and nebulous phrases. (She "attended" UCLA; she worked as a "counselor.") When mentioning Sparks's work at a California drug rehab, Nilsen added that Sparks "was vague about the specifics."

What about Sparks's credentials, and her claims of majoring in psychology? "On the dust jacket of *VOICES*," wrote Nilsen, "it appears that Sparks is a professional youth counselor or social worker. But during the interview, I was given no evidence of formal training or professional affiliation."

Even so, Nilsen pulled her punches. She didn't ask to see a diploma, and she dutifully relayed *Alice*'s standard backstory, ignoring the contradictions.

She also didn't ask about *Jay's Journal*, then approaching paperback release. If she had, Sparks might have blundered, leading Nilsen to the Barretts, who lived just nine miles away—at which point the whole thing could have collapsed, taking Sparks down with it. But Nilsen went easy, and Sparks, who should have been grateful, lashed out instead.

"Alleen Pace Nilsen's article regarding *Go Ask Alice* was not only incorrect, but in places openly hostile," began Sparks's letter to *School Library Journal*.

"The article was entitled 'The House that Alice Built.' Said title is totally incorrect. Most of the money received from *Go Ask Alice* has gone into rehabilitation and other forms of helping young people. My husband is an important, respected, and successful businessman in both California and Utah. Helping kids is as important to him as it is to me!"

Those three words—*important*, *respected*, *successful*—were key. More than money, Beatrice Sparks sought elevation, to *be* somebody. (As Alice wrote in her diary, "I want so much to be someone important.")

Sparks's writing, her prosperous husband, her many good works—they were tiles in a personal mosaic. So was her oft-touted education, and she snapped at Nilsen's "no evidence of formal training" comment.

"'No evidence of formal training'? I graduated from UCLA as a psychology major."

After another four paragraphs, she finally signed off: "Beatrice M. Sparks, Provo, Utah."*

• • •

Reading Sparks's response, Alleen Nilsen was surprised by the fury, but didn't take it personally. Whatever else you wanted to say, Beatrice Sparks was intriguing.

In the following decades, Nilsen would become a leading authority on children's literature, writing a dozen books on the subject. She would also keep an eye on Sparks's career—equal parts fan, scholar, and amateur detective.

The ongoing surveillance went both ways. As Alleen Nilsen would learn thirty years later, Beatrice Sparks held grudges for life . . . and beyond.

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* By coincidence, a different Beatrice Sparks attended UCLA in 1920 (when Beatrice *Mathews* Sparks was only three years old). While it's doubtful that BMS knew this, it was another layer of (inadvertent) protection.

Bad Moon Rising

Throughout 1979, *Jay's Journal* was a low, distant rumble. Background noise for a season of darkness.

On March 28, a nuclear reactor in Pennsylvania melted down, dosing two million people with radiation. Officials downplayed the cancer risk, then paid $25 million to silence the victims. Five days later, anthrax spores escaped from a Soviet lab and drifted into a nearby village, killing more than sixty people and hundreds of farm animals.

In nightclubs, bathhouses, maternity wards, and blood banks, a new plague was festering, but would take a few years to fully explode. Those who needed biblical imagery *stat* could look to the Sahara Desert, where, for the first time in recorded history, it snowed for half an hour.

In Iran, a trigger-happy bigot took control of the government, crushing dissent and creating a giant, nation-shaped prison. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini had no fear of death, and actually seemed to relish the idea, so long as a lot of *other* people (particularly Jews, friends of Jews, and anyone who didn't loathe Jews . . . or gays) died first.

When his lackeys took fifty-three Americans hostage, Khomeini cheered the kidnappings, and coined a phrase to describe America: "The Great Satan."* The hostages languished in Tehran for more than a year, and Khomeini made the most of it, mocking the US as an impotent giant.

• • •

Across America, more and more people felt a gut-level tension—a sense that the country was coming apart.

The Vietnam War was finally over, and Watergate was finished, but there hadn't been any closure. Nixon had fled to California and was living in splendor, shielded by an executive pardon. North and South Vietnam had become a single Communist power, exactly what the US had spent fifty-eight thousand lives to prevent.

The dollar was falling, jobs were scarce, and inflation was nearing double digits. Overseas companies like Honda, Sony, and Volkswagen, from nations the US had bombed into powder, were surging ahead, shaping the future and setting the rules.

What did Americans do with this mounting, irresolvable anger? They turned on each other, splitting down the middle over "values," a catchall way to judge complete strangers.

Gay rights, affirmative action, school prayer, pornography—everywhere you looked, the ground was shifting, and the old customs wobbled. Was it progress or calamity? It all depended on your view, and on your vision of America.

By decade's end, a violent populism had spread to the airwaves, where it postured as the voice of God. Overwhelmingly white, male, and southern, the new evangelists harnessed a growing resentment: the sense that families were under assault.

"I believe this is the last generation before Jesus comes," said the Reverend Jerry Falwell, leader of the Moral Majority political-action group. "All this homosexuality, unisex, the women's movement, pornography on movies and television . . . I see the disintegration of the home."

The growing number of working mothers, said Falwell, was, "an assault by Satan on the family."

In Pasadena, Reverend Robert Grant made a similar claim to the hundred-thousand members of Voice, his evangelical pressure group. "America has come under increasing attack from Satan's forces in recent years," Grant told the faithful in 1979. "Satan's strategy is ahead of schedule."

To a large slice of the population, Falwell's and Grant's conclusions rang true. The sixties were long gone, and things were still unraveling. Kids were defiant and volatile, increasingly hard to grasp or control. You see, it

wasn't *just* the drugs, or the "free love," or the profane music that blared from every radio. Those were only the breadcrumbs—different lures to the same dark trap. Whatever your children loved, that's what Satan would use. And once he snared them, they were his, body and soul.

• • •

Thus, as 1980 approached, America was on the brink of a long nervous breakdown—a fifteen-year frenzy that would destroy whole communities, shattering lives with roulette abandon.

Later, when the chaos receded, scholars would examine the wreckage, searching for inflection points.

In *Dangerous Games*, his 2015 study of 1980s social hysteria, religious-studies professor Joseph Laycock described the wire-crossing moment.

"Many Americans," wrote Laycock, "truly did feel an invisible force that seemed to be all around them, corrupting their children and undermining the values of the family.

"*Jay's Journal*," he continued, "exploited these fears, and connected them to larger concerns about adolescents. *Jay* [also] established the narrative of teenagers as 'brilliant victims' who are vulnerable *because* they are geniuses."

Satan, in other words, wasn't just after our children, but after our best and brightest (and, the media whispered, *whitest*) children. Kids who had once been decent and courteous, but who now seemed like angry imposters.

These hybrid anxieties, Laycock noted, were "expressed in symbolic terms . . . and the symbols were then mistaken for reality."

Once again, Beatrice Sparks had perfect timing, blending militant faith with parental dread, and unleashing a new kind of menace.

"*Jay's Journal*," Laycock concluded, "helped trigger the Satanic Panic."

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* The Soviet Union, to its probable shame, was "The Lesser Satan."

Part Four

Contagion

Wicked Game

Thursday, February 28, 1980

I can feel the Devil right here in the media center," said the woman, her eyes sweeping the library walls. "Some of these books have got to be suspect."

Mike Tunnell opened his mouth, then hesitated. What could he say? *The Devil? Really? Does he have late fees?*

But Tunnell knew better than to joke. These people were out for blood, and all because of a *game*. Where was a Ring of Invisibility when you needed one?

• • •

Heber City was thirty minutes northwest of Pleasant Grove and resembled a dairy commercial: breathtaking mountains, sparkling water, endless fields of lush green alfalfa. In Heber, people farmed, went to sleep, farmed some more, and went to church. When they needed something that wasn't sold on Main Street, they usually drove to Provo.

For kids who didn't like farming (or religion, or sports), life in Heber City was something to endure. If you were lucky, you found a few friends,

and everyone stuck together, making the best of it.

When Wasatch Middle School launched an after-school program, it drew those same kids—the ones seeking refuge. Two teachers, Mike Tunnell and Cecil Black, ran the program, and for a few hours every week, students could stay late and study computers, or a foreign language, or do hands-on science work.*

The goals were education and communication, and the latter was often the bigger challenge. Then as now, bookworms could be shy and weird, afraid of a pantsing (or worse). Even if the beatdown never happened, it lurked around each corner, making it hard to relax. That's what made *Dungeons & Dragons* so great: it got you talking. After a while, you weren't nervous or second-guessing; you were just being yourself.

Tunnell and Black had discovered *Dungeons & Dragons* in a Provo hobby shop. They watched as players rolled dice, tallied points, and argued over strategy. There was competition, but only to a point. The game was inherently team-based; you had to work together, or everyone got killed.

As Tolkien fans, Tunnell and Black loved *D&D*'s epic vibe. As educators, they realized that the game could teach without teaching. Basic math, spatial relations, narrative structure, predictive reasoning, and above all, human interaction. Things, in other words, that football or baseball offered, but without the physical boundaries. At the gaming table, you could be blind and missing both legs, but still lead your comrades to glory.

After watching for a few minutes, Tunnell and Black had a shared thought. *We should try this at Wasatch Middle.*

Tunnell and Black weren't fools. They printed up permission slips, and if a parent didn't sign, the student couldn't play. Two dozen slips came back, and in the first weeks of 1980, *Dungeons & Dragons* joined the after-school program.

For a while, everything was fine. Better than fine: kids who rarely spoke were engaged and social. There were arguments and occasional insults—these were middle school students, after all—but on the whole, it was going just as Tunnell and Black had hoped.

Then, something changed. A few miles away, in Pleasant Grove, people were talking about covens and underground chambers. About *human sacrifice*. All of it led by some teenager named "Jay."

The talk grew louder and skipped all over town, mixing and merging and changing shape. By the time it reached adult ears, it was hard to know *what* was going on.

In late January 1980, a handful of parents went to Wasatch Middle's principal, Bill Dudley, and complained about the after-school program. *Spells? Demons? Talismans? What are you teaching these kids?*

Dudley had no personal issue with *Dungeons & Dragons*, but if parents griped, you had to do something, if only to cover your own backside. Dudley asked the local parent-teacher association to review the game and report back. Was *D&D* suitable for teens? Pre-teens? Was it offensive or dangerous?

The PTA's response was unanimous. *It's just a game. If kids have permission from home, let them play.*

That chafed at Linda Burnes, who sat on the regional PTA board. Burnes wanted *Dungeons & Dragons* banned from school property, and made so much noise that the county board of education finally stepped in, creating a committee to decide the issue. Weeks later, by secret ballot, the committee voted 25–7 to keep *D&D* as an extracurricular activity.

Annoyed by this democratic setback, the censors got personal, targeting Tunnell and Black directly. Someone sent a letter to the school board president: *Mike Tunnell is sleeping with your wife*. The accuser was anonymous, and the claim unfounded, but that didn't matter. Allegations were a weapon, and facts just got in the way.

Tunnell was shocked by the ugly tactics. "All these people in my own church were willing to believe the worst about me," he later said, "based on threads of gossip."

Burnes, meanwhile, went for the kill, delivering a bundle of *D&D* scare sheets to the office of Mormon Church President Spencer W. Kimball—akin to stopping by the Vatican unannounced. (She got as far as Kimball's secretary, who agreed to pass the info along.)

That done, Burnes turned her attention to the school board. For the next several nights, she showed up at board members' homes, knocking on their doors after dinner, when they'd have no excuse for cutting things short.

"This game is really *evil*," Burnes would gush in a sugary voice. "How much evil do you want the kids to have?"

Not long after, a cluster of parents strode into Wasatch Middle, walked past the front desk, and entered Tunnell's classroom, disrupting his English lesson. "We came," said one of the parents, "to see what evil you're teaching." Then they stood there, watching, as he did his best to continue.

Tunnell stopped eating. He couldn't sleep. His stomach ached from dry heaves. His phone rang constantly, people calling to threaten or scold him. He grew phobic—afraid to answer the phone, afraid to ignore it. At night, he would pace the house, chewing his nails and peering outside.

A few weeks into the controversy, the school board made an aesthetic change, telling Tunnell to cover the game manuals with plain black paper.[*] If parents couldn't *see* the game, thought administrators, that might be enough.

Thursday, March 27, 1980

At the next board meeting, the censors arrived with nearly three hundred supporters. They packed the room and spilled into the hall, where news anchors were doing live shots. It was a zoo. Then the speeches started. *Dungeons & Dragons* was antireligious. It led to possession. It was Satanic.

"The [*Dungeons & Dragons*] books are filled with witchcraft," said one man. "They are filled with things that are *not* fantasy, but are actual in the real demon world, and can be very dangerous for anyone involved in the game because it leaves them open to Satanic spirits."

Someone read a letter from Erma Christensen, who sat on Utah's Board of Education.

"This kind of game," wrote Christensen, "brings out murder, poisons, and assassinations. It is Satanic. You can take my word for it."[†]

Tunnell and Black should have known to stay quiet. You can't reason with a herd. If you try, it only squeals louder. Still, Tunnell, who was a Latter-day Saint and social conservative, did his best, comparing *Dungeons & Dragons* to The Chronicles of Narnia.

The crowd responded with growls and hisses.

A board member jumped in, bringing some order and suggesting a compromise: the after-school program could continue, and *Dungeons & Dragons* could remain, but without the game manuals.

It wasn't much of a compromise. The manuals *were* the game; without them, you couldn't really play. And it didn't matter anyway. Tunnell and Black knew what was coming. Weeks later, the parents were back with more demands, pushing for total victory. In April 1980, Superintendent of Schools Doug Merkley backed down, pulling the game entirely.

• • •

For Mike Tunnell and Cecil Black, the defeat wasn't just upsetting—it was frightening, like something out of Salem. Beyond that, it was a slap at the very students that parents were bent on "protecting." Even in rural Utah, kids faced a minefield, from simple isolation to major depression, and the combination could be lethal. But mental health was a vast, tangled area, and few had the patience for long-term adjustments. It was faster and easier to create your own answers, especially to difficult problems, and by 1980, one such problem had become a national crisis.

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* The program's full name was the "Gifted and Talented Program," which, itself, probably angered some people.

* Probably the wrong color choice, all things considered.

† When not campaigning—as it were—against *Dungeons & Dragons*, the versatile Christensen fought to ban Planned Parenthood, defeat the Equal Rights Amendment, undo Title IX, and block a school breakfast program for poor children.

Suicide Solution

> We would like to applaud Mayor Oren Probert for his decision not to allow our public facilities to be used by special interest groups for the purpose of promoting and teaching "role-playing games" such as *Dungeons & Dragons*.
>
> We draw your attention to the book edited from a diary written by a Utah boy entitled *Jay's Journal* by Beatrice Sparks (Dell Paperback 1979). Sparks indicates that the boy was extremely intelligent, became involved in various spiritualistic experiences and then ended his life by suicide.
>
> —Connie King and Helga Cochrane, letter to the editor, *Tooele Bulletin*, April 6, 1982

The teen suicide rate had been climbing since 1970, and by 1980, it was up nearly 50 percent. That was strange enough, but the demographics were even stranger. Most of the victims were white teenage males, and not by a little: the skew was five to one.

It defied all the clichés. What did young white men have to be upset about?

That was part of the problem: no one really knew. Drug use? Maybe. Mental illness? Maybe. Sexual identity? Abuse? They were all possibilities, but that was a long way from knowing.

Even the safest guess—depression—was a blind alley. What did "depression" really *mean*, and where did it come from? Was Johnny depressed because he got high, or did Johnny get high to battle depression?

The dead boys weren't around to explain things, and suicide notes were often withheld (or destroyed) by the family. Asking the parents was painful and frequently useless; most were at a loss, and those who knew about abuse usually stayed quiet.

So the deaths kept coming. At least once a day, someone found their teenage son hanging from the rafters, or idling a car in a sealed-up garage. Endless wondering was fruitless and corrosive, so parents groped for answers—anything to have an explanation.

For Art Linkletter, it was LSD. For Marcella Barrett, it was a breakup.

After *Jay's Journal*, there was a new option.

Monday, August 11, 1980

In a tiny apartment in Dayton, Ohio, Kevin Bach jolted awake.

What the hell was that?

Kevin waited a moment, then slipped out of bed and crept down the hallway toward the living room. The air was thick and smelled like ammonia.

As his eyes adjusted to the dark, Kevin saw Dallas Egbert, seventeen, sprawled on the ratty couch, his head facing the other direction.

Something was wrong. Something about Dallas's breathing.

Kevin stepped closer. The couch looked *wet*, especially—

On the floor lay a pistol.

"Dallas!"

At the sound of his name, Dallas lolled his head toward Kevin, and blood poured down his face.

Kevin ran for the telephone.

• • •

At two years old, James Dallas Egbert knew the alphabet. At three, he was reading. At fourteen, he finished high school. That fall, he enrolled at Michigan State University for the 1978–1979 year to study computer science.

Starting college at fifteen would have taxed anyone's nerves, but Dallas (who always preferred his middle name) had some additional burdens. He was epileptic, and lived in fear of sudden, convulsive seizures. He was also gay, and male/male sex was a crime in twenty-five states. Even where it wasn't illegal, being gay could get you beaten or killed. At minimum, you'd endure taunts and stares, and Dallas already felt like an outsider.

One upside to living on campus: there were lots of other nerds; men and women who cherished Tolkien, Lovecraft, *Star Trek* . . . and *Dungeons & Dragons*. Dallas loved playing *D&D*, but he often got completely blotto, which made everyone nervous. He was still underage, and the other players would catch hell if something happened, so they asked him to stay away.

Dallas's drinking got worse, and his depression deepened. He added drugs to the mix, sometimes creating his own supply in MSU's chemistry lab.

On August 15, 1979, Dallas Egbert, now sixteen, wrote a two-line note:

> To whom it may concern:
> Should my body be found, I wish it to be cremated.

Then he disappeared with a bottle of pills, intending to kill himself.

He woke up a day or so later, feeling like shit but very much alive. Hoping to stay off the radar, he crashed with some off-campus friends, then caught a bus heading south. He just wanted to vanish.

Dallas's parents, meanwhile, were sick with worry and hired a private detective to find their missing son. The detective, in turn, dismissed Dallas's suicide note as "a forgery" and fixated on the *Dungeons & Dragons* angle. Perhaps, mused the detective, Dallas had suffered a mental break, and *D&D* had consumed him. Maybe he was hiding on campus or wandering the streets of East Lansing, lost inside a medieval dreamworld.

The media *loved* this theory. *Boy Genius Dons Wizard Hat, Seeks Grail at Local K-Mart*—or whatever. Much more exciting than clinical

depression.

Michigan police spent several days scouring the MSU campus, particularly the underground steam tunnels. Nothing turned up, but the *D&D* story lingered.

The following month, Dallas, who'd drifted south toward Texas, finally called home. When he learned his parents had emptied their savings to find him, the guilt and shame were crushing. He returned to Michigan, where depression and drugs continued their damage.

Eleven months later, on August 11, 1980, Dallas shot himself in the living room of the gloomy apartment he'd rented with Kevin Bach, a platonic acquaintance from the local gay scene. After a week of life support, doctors pulled the plug. Dallas Egbert was seventeen.

• • •

When Dallas initially vanished from MSU, *Jay's Journal* was a pricey hardcover with limited reach. By the time he shot himself, *Jay* was in paperback, on its way to selling a quarter-million copies. More to the point, *Jay* had infected Heber City's *Dungeons & Dragons* controversy, planting the notion of underage Satanists.

Dallas Egbert, Boy Genius, became Dallas Egbert, Boy Occultist, and when the facts didn't support that claim, people invented *new* facts.

From the *Calgary Herald*:

> Egbert was a Michigan State University Student who disappeared into a maze of heating tunnels under MSU's campus in 1979. When he reappeared in August 1980, the boy wrote, "I'll give Satan my mind and power." He then shot himself to death.

From the *Montreal Gazette*:

> Egbert, a 17-year-old computer whiz kid, was a member of the Tolkien Society at Michigan State University. "I'll give Satan my mind and my power," he wrote before killing himself.

The quote about Satan seemingly came from thin air, then replicated. Dallas Egbert's Satanic suicide was soon accepted as fact, appearing in books and essays across the nation.

• • •

From the beginning, Alden Barrett and Dallas Egbert were similar. Uncommonly bright and deeply depressed, both sought relief in drugs, booze, and simulated combat (debate for Alden; *D&D* for Dallas). Both ran away from home, only to return soon after, chastened and embarrassed. Both had a taste for the mystical and a deep disdain for authority, and both were dead by seventeen, warm handguns near their bodies.

Now they shared another trait. Both were sucked into *Jay*'s horrific narrative, unwitting fuel for an ugly new fire; a blaze that absorbed whatever it touched, growing larger and meaner with each new addition.

May 1981

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON—Michael Dempsey, seventeen, commits suicide with his father's handgun. Michael's father, Patrick, a retired police officer, blames the occult, telling authorities that his son was invoking demons and that, prior to the suicide, the boy's voice "changed, as if demonically possessed." Newspapers (including the *Chicago Tribune*) repeat the "invoking demons" claim, which soon spreads.

June 1982

RICHMOND, VIRGINIA—Irving Pulling, sixteen, commits suicide with a gunshot to the chest. Irving, who belonged to his school's "Talented and

Gifted" program, had long felt like an outcast and struggled to make friends. Irving's mother, Patricia, blames her son's death on the occult and eventually writes a book on the subject, *The Devil's Web*. Its description begins:

> Pat Pulling lived every mother's worst nightmare. In 1982, her unusually bright and gifted son died by his own hand after a brief and terrifying journey into the world of the occult.

"A white male who is intelligent, creative, and curious," Pulling later writes, "is the most likely to be seduced by the occult."

October 1982

DENVER, COLORADO—Stephen Loyacono, sixteen, commits suicide by running his parents' car in the garage.

Recounting the incident in their book about the occult (*Satanism: Is Your Family Safe?*), authors Ted Schwarz and Duane Empey imitate *Jay's Journal*, printing portions of Stephen's private diary alongside their overcooked commentary:

> He was fourteen when it started, a boy of brilliance, a faithful churchgoer, an honor student . . . in retrospect, his parents realized that they probably should have gotten more involved with their son, but . . . the only indication of his internal struggle came from his diary.
>
> To some, he might seem to have been possessed, at least in retrospect.

In exchange for his pact with the Devil, say the authors, Stephen Loyacono sought powers of invisibility, the ability to shape shift, and the power to levitate objects.

• • •

In a happy coincidence for censors and zealots, the people most likely to kill themselves—young white males—were also the primary audience for *Dungeons & Dragons*, and the game was wedged into countless suicides as a proximate cause. For the next twenty years, adults in every corner of America would charge *D&D* (and its media cousins, heavy metal and horror) with destroying young lives. And nearly always the same *kind* of lives: white, mercurial males with high IQs and oddball intensity. They were skeptics and dreamers, gifted in science or language, with a taste for the otherworldly.

They were, in short, clones of Alden Barrett.

Prior to *Jay's Journal*, "teen occult suicide" was all but unheard of. A decade later, it was everywhere—a ready blueprint for grieving parents, red-faced preachers, or anyone else who craved small, tidy answers. Never mind the drug use, or the sexual confusion, or the figurative hell of adolescence. (Never mind the *ocean of guns*, for that matter, or their availability to almost anyone.) No, it was demonic possession. Or a role-playing game. Or a witchy girlfriend. Anything but the ugly, messy truth.

Kid Fears

> "The school used to be in Mapleton, Utah . . . but citizens grew tired of finding children who had escaped from the school with iron manacles around their ankles. The school was told to relocate and they did."
>
> —*Testimony from Hearings on Abuse and Neglect of Children in Institutions, Day 2, before the Subcommittee on Child and Human Development, 96th Congress (1979)*

Oak Hill School opened for business in March 1971, the month Alden Barrett died. Less than two years later, Mapleton (population two thousand) essentially kicked the school out of town. Horrible stories had started to spread.

In March 1973, the school—sporting a new name—resurfaced in Provo Canyon, a location that proved more fitting.

Provo Canyon School (or PCS) was for boys who "required placement outside their homes due to their lack of achievement and behavior in public schools," and if that seemed a little . . . *broad*, it wasn't by mistake.

PCS received a truckload of public money, but was privately owned and operated, and it cast a wide marketing net, receiving teens from all over the nation. Some were criminals. Some were addicts. Others had spotless records, but suffered from mental or emotional issues. Many had learning disorders or physical handicaps.

At Provo Canyon School, backgrounds didn't matter. Everyone was equally brutalized.

Each new student, regardless of history or health, was ordered to stand, facing a wall, for up to fifteen hours a day. This, said school officials, was to promote "right thinking." Students who stood incorrectly—or collapsed from fatigue—had to start over. Students who resisted were locked in small rooms for days on end, then given additional hours of standing. If a student was "belligerent," the PCS employee manual had a suggestion: grab the student with one hand and yank on his hair with the other. Some teens lost whole chunks of hair this way, and occasionally gained a black eye or two.

Boys who complained spent weeks in locked isolation. To get out of confinement, they had to pass a polygraph test about their "attitude, truthfulness, and future conduct." If the polygraph said they'd broken a rule, they were punished. If the polygraph said they'd *thought* about breaking a rule, they were punished.

If any of this made a boy seem "anxious," staffers could "physically and chemically restrain" them (read: tie them down and inject them with Haldol or other powerful antipsychotics), all without direct medical supervision.

Every student at PCS endured this environment, including those with no criminal record, those with mental or emotional issues, and those sent there for special education.

From the beginning, students tried to get help, writing desperate, panicked letters to parents and friends. Outgoing mail was intercepted and opened, and students were forced to rewrite the letters, minus any "negative thoughts."

Parents were discouraged from visiting. When visits *were* scheduled, boys were polygraphed before and after. If the test "proved" that a boy had complained about the school, or that he *might* complain about the school, calls and visits were suspended. (Access to legal help was restricted as "anti-therapeutic.")

To leave the facility, even temporarily, a student had to sign a contract promising not to criticize the school or its methods. As soon as he signed, he was polygraphed. If the machine said the boy was lying, he was punished and his release was delayed or canceled.

• • •

Doyle and Marcella Barrett should have seen through the school's puffy, tough-love marketing. As a medical doctor and mental-health advocate, Doyle in particular should have sensed that something was wrong. (PCS "counselors" were required to be at least six-foot-two and weigh two hundred pounds.)

Instead, the Barretts crossed their fingers and sent Scott inside.

Nearly eighteen months later, on a rare visit home, Scott gave his parents an ultimatum: *If you send me back, you will never see me again. I'll get out and vanish forever.*

They relented, and Scott returned to Pleasant Grove High School.

"You can't even imagine the psychological damage that place did," Scott says of his time at PCS. "It turned me into a survivor, but I learned a lot of bad stuff, too."

• • •

By 1980, conditions at Provo Canyon School were a matter of public record. A lawsuit by the ACLU had made local headlines and led to a federal ban on several practices, including over-drugging—a ban the school largely ignored.

Yet PCS stayed open for business and later went coed, promising to provide "healthy and positive life experiences," enabling young men and women to "return home better-adjusted and confident."

It would take another four decades for anything like a full reckoning. In the meantime, parents in Heber City lost their minds over *Dungeons & Dragons*, Orem city hall hosted a seminar claiming that magazine ads contained "hidden symbols of death and Satanic worship," and up north in Layton, a Baptist congregation burned thousands of rock albums because "secret backward messages" held "invitations to worship the devil."

Provo authorities, meanwhile, went for the gold, merging multiple strains of paranoia into unintentional slapstick.

From the *Daily Herald*, November 1, 1981:

> Provo police have asked school officials to warn children not to accept candy or stamps from strangers. The stamps could contain glue laced with LSD.
>
> "Timpanogos, Franklin and Grandview elementary schools have reported seeing a male dressed as a clown in the vicinity of the schools," says Provo Police Chief Swen Nielsen. "At Timpanogos, children said a clown was giving away candy and stamps."
>
> Nielsen says in all instances, Provo police canvassed neighborhoods but could not find evidence that the clown was the same individual or if LSD-laced stamps were involved.
>
> "We've gotten varying descriptions of the clown," adds Nielsen. "There's no doubt a clown has been in the area of elementary schools. But whether it is the same clown, or if he is doing anything illegal, is still a question."

In all reported cases, the clown turned out to be "Cinderbritches," the local fire department's mascot, who—accompanied by a uniformed firefighter—visited schools to warn kids about the dangers of fires.

• • •

In churches, at town halls, and soon in therapists' offices, eagle-eyed grown-ups were looking for monsters, but only where they didn't exist.

Beatrice Sparks (who, as the *Daily Herald* put it, "dedicated herself to writing about those youth who are in such desperate need of help") lived just *four hundred yards* from Provo Canyon School.

But she had other demons to fight.

Distant Early Warning

Monday, January 26, 1981

Sitting in her London hotel suite, Beatrice Sparks looked nervous and tired. It might have been jet lag, but speaking to journalist Shirley Davenport of the *Doncaster Evening Post*, Sparks had a different explanation. The stress and fatigue, she told Davenport, were from long investigations into black magic.

"The American kids are absolutely terrified to talk to me about it," Sparks said, her hands knotting and unknotting as she talked. "It's not like drugs, or any of those other things. With witchcraft, they are so frightened they won't even open their mouths."

Sparks was in London to promote the British release of *Jay's Journal*. Ten years after Alden Barrett's death, his corrupted diary had become a global product.

"Society," warned Sparks, "should be asking itself why the suicide rate among teenagers was growing so alarmingly in recent years. How much of it is connected to witchcraft?"

As Davenport scribbled, Sparks painted a bloody, frightening picture. Youngsters, she said, were "getting hooked on witchcraft . . . rituals involving orgies, devil-worship, curses, animal mutilations and sacrifices," and she had risked her own safety to prove it.

“One boy was afraid something would happen to me or my children if I knew too much,” she told Davenport. “He’d made some kind of covenant.”

What’s more, Sparks warned, the danger had spread far beyond the United States.

“I’m sure, from what I already know,” said Sparks, “that witchcraft is widespread in Europe and rife in London. I’ve heard indirectly that the use of Ouija boards and the soft approach to witchcraft is growing rapidly.”

It was grim and rattling stuff, and according to Sparks, it all came straight from the source.

“Jay’s diary,” Davenport wrote in the finished article, “was found concealed in a box in the loft of his home. After skimming through it, his mother sent it to Beatrice Sparks, suggesting that its publication may prevent other youngsters from getting hooked on witchcraft.”

• • •

For Sparks, the interview’s crowning moment might have been the photo shoot. Standing outside in the cool London air, she posed in a dazzling white fur coat, its upturned collar framing her delicate features.

As the photographer zoomed in, harrowing pressures were building.

Like a midocean earthquake, *Jay*’s initial force had been minor. The real damage was on the horizon, gaining speed and heading for land.

Sparks put one hand on a black iron railing, looked into the camera, and smiled.

Dirty Laundry

November 1982

At Brigham Young University's bookstore, bundled newspapers arrived for display. On the front page, larger than everything else, was an illustration of a boy in a hooded black cloak gripping a giant (and phallic) ceremonial knife. Behind him, a Star of David hovered over a single large eye.

The headline said, "Beyond *Jay's Journal*—Dispelling Occult Myths."

• • •

Launched by two BYU grad students in 1981, the *Seventh East Press* was an indie counterbalance to the school's official newspaper, and it carried a reputation for tough, even-handed reporting—which only made "Beyond *Jay's Journal*" more egregious.

The idea had come a few weeks earlier, with five or six *Press* staffers tossing around story ideas. It was close to Halloween, and the brainstorming drifted in that direction.

Somebody mentioned *Jay's Journal*, and the room lit up. "We'd all read it," *Press* production manager Dean Huffaker said years later, "and we

thought, ‘It’s gotta be bullshit—that would be fun to look into.’”

Camera in hand, Huffaker headed to Pleasant Grove to get the real story.

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Reflecting on “Beyond *Jay’s Journal*” decades later, Dean Huffaker remembers a hard-hitting piece of journalism; the dispelling of hearsay and the finding of fact.

The actual article was somewhat different.

“High school groups like the one [Jay] was involved with still exist,” Huffaker concluded, “and appear to have grown in popularity.”

A bold assertion. How had Huffaker learned of these Satanic cliques?

Reliable Source Number One:

> James Randolf (a pseudonym), a local counselor who has talked to numerous youths involved with such groups, estimates there are eleven to fifteen students in every high school—and six to ten students in every junior high school—involved with occult groups.

Reliable Source Number Two:

> A high school student named Bryan (a pseudonym) who was formerly involved in occult activities commented, “I’ve heard of human sacrifice in other parts of the country, but I’m not aware of any occurring in this area. It has been an open discussion at times, though.”

Reliable Source Number Three:

> Rich (a pseudonym), another student who is no longer involved with high school occult groups, explained that animal sacrifice is sometimes a part of necromantic rites (invoking spirits). “Most of

> the time it will be a hen or a billy goat. I've heard of cows being used, but I've never seen it done—they're too big."

Reliable Source Number Four:

> A Utah Valley resident named Danny Simms (a pseudonym) was introduced to Satanism while serving a prison sentence. "About four of us got together and started our own Satanic cult, just for something to do with our time."

What the hell kind of reporting was this? Did the story use *any* real names? Actually, yes:

> In reality, "Jay" was a teenager named Alden Barrett who resided with his family in Pleasant Grove. In his diary he accounts how he and his two best friends, Mike Waid and John Lundgren, began experimenting with drugs and the Occult. Barrett later committed suicide on March 14, 1971.*

Lest readers miss the point, the paper included a large photo of Alden Barrett's tombstone.

The pseudonymous sources used awkward, ren-faire syntax (rituals involved "tying girls to trees and performing oddities with them"), and seemingly hinted at major crimes, including a recent murder.

And where was this horror taking place?

Pleasant Grove, of course. According to the *Seventh East Press*, Alden Barrett's tiny hometown was a hellmouth of violence, and his diary was required reading for local warlocks.

"Members of the group are encouraged to read books about Satanism," said pseudonymous Bryan, with pseudonymous Rich adding, "Everyone involved in local [occult] groups has read *Jay's Journal*."

This wasn't a supermarket tabloid. The *Seventh East Press* was sold in BYU's on-campus bookstore, and positioned itself as the voice of reason.

While researching the article, Dean Huffaker contacted Beatrice Sparks and asked how much of *Jay's Journal* was true. Her two-sentence reply had

a lawyer's vague precision. "Entries in any diary," Sparks told Huffaker, "are irregular and somewhat sketchy. It is often necessary to fill in the gaps to make it more readable and coherent."

The Barretts, on the other hand, got shafted. Huffaker didn't ask for their comments or even tell them the article was coming. Instead, they learned about it the same way they'd learned about *Jay* itself: after the fact and far too late.

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* While relaying "Jay's" real name, hometown, and friends, Huffaker got the death date wrong: Alden died on March 13.

A Fortune in Lies

In the wake of *Jay's Journal*, a flood of demonic exposés emerged, each more lurid than the last. *Devil Child*, *The Ultimate Evil*, *Say You Love Satan*—thick, soft books with big, easy print, perfect for airports and study halls.

Even Canada joined in with *Michelle Remembers*, an overwrought doorstop disguised as a memoir.

Michelle's narrative read like exorcist porn. In 1973, seeking help for depression, twenty-seven-year-old Michelle Proby sought treatment from Victoria, B.C. psychiatrist Lawrence Pazder. Under hypnosis, Proby "recovered" a gruesome memory: when she was five, her mother had essentially given her to the Church of Satan for a year.

During that year, said Proby, the Satanists:

- buried her alive;
- made her eat part of a flambéed corpse;
- buried her alive *again*, this time with several cats;
- cut up multiple babies and shoved the pieces into her face, and
- killed one of her young friends, dismembered the body, and made Proby piece it back together again.

What's more, said Proby, the Satanists cut holes in her scalp, attached horns to her skull, and *grafted a tail to her spine*. Then they locked her in a cage for three months, earning a visit from Satan himself.

Just when all seemed lost and hopeless, both Jesus *and* the Virgin Mary appeared in person, zapping the Satanists, rescuing Proby—and apparently erasing the horns/tail evidence.

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As Michelle Proby uncovered these memories, Dr. Lawrence Pazder slowly moved closer. Then he started holding her hand. Sometimes he'd put an arm around her. Inevitably, Pazder joined Proby on the sofa, where she could lean her head on his shoulder. Finally, they moved to the floor, onto the thick rubber mat Pazder used for "body-release techniques." Sometimes they stayed on the mat for five or six hours.

Both were married, but that didn't last, and by mid-1980, Proby and Pazder (that is, *patient and psychiatrist*) were freshly divorced and able to marry each other, which they eventually did. They also landed a six-figure deal for *Michelle Remembers: The True Story of a Year-Long Contest between Innocence and Evil*.*

On closer inspection—this should go without saying—Michelle Proby's recovered memories turned into smoke. (Those months locked in a cage, wearing grafted-on horns? She was in school the whole time, a fact confirmed by photos and homework. Her life as an only child? Explain that to her sisters.)

In the meantime, *Michelle Remembers* made a big splash, selling tens of thousands of copies and getting a mountain of press. And why not? It was all entirely true; everyone said so. Even the *New York Times* weighed in, calling *Michelle Remembers* a "psychiatric case history," which was like calling Atlantis the fifty-first state.

Maybe the *Times* just wanted to be consistent. Its publishing arm was still cashing checks from *Jay's Journal*, so branding *Michelle Remembers* a fraud might have raised awkward questions.

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Jay, meanwhile, continued to spread, cropping up in books about suicide, black magic, and adolescent mental health. In 1983's *A Cry for Help*, child psychiatrist Mary Giffin quoted from *Jay's Journal*, then slapped at Doyle and Marcella:

> Anyone who reads *Jay's Journal* could see that Jay's girlfriend was the least of several pressing, serious problems. Jay's parents probably could have saved their son if Jay had been talking to them instead of his journal. Remember: teens who need help don't "grow out of it." They become adults who need help—if they live that long.

Of course, the Barretts had known full well that Alden wouldn't "grow out of it," and they had tried every possible approach, including—yes—a *psychiatrist*, who had concluded that Alden "wasn't truly depressed." Giffin skipped that part, preferring to lump everything onto the family. Or Satan. Or whomever.

This flip dismissal was exactly what people craved. It was short, simple, and put the blame on somebody else. You could fit it on a matchbook.

Promoting *A Cry for Help* in 1983, Giffin, who ran a mental health clinic near Chicago, gave several interviews to local reporters, and the stories drifted like toxic fog. Eighteen miles west, adolescent psychiatrist John W. Tucker decided to investigate. He picked up a copy of *Jay's Journal* and started reading.

Tucker was a PhD with degrees from BYU, Columbia, and Harvard. If that wasn't enough, he'd done postdoctoral work at Oxford and was the former chancellor of Purdue Northwest.

Reading *Jay's Journal*, Tucker grew worried. Was it possible that some of his teenage patients were actually witches?

Before long, Tucker was convinced, and it was even worse than he'd feared.

Writing on Purdue letterhead, Tucker shared his findings with *Jay*'s editor, Beatrice Sparks. Not only were the area kids into witchcraft, wrote Tucker, but a pack of spellcasting grown-ups was actually trying to *recruit* him.

Fortunately, John Tucker was a man of power. In addition to his private psychiatric practice, he sat on the American Board of Medical Psychotherapy.

Concluding his letter to Sparks, Tucker made it clear that he knew the stakes. This was about *the children.*

"These young people," he wrote, "need help."

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* None of this troubled the Canadian Medical Association, which allowed Lawrence Pazder to practice psychiatry for another two decades.

Heroes Are Hard to Find

Spring 1983

Sixty feet under Quantico, Virginia, inside a converted bomb shelter, the FBI's Behavioral Sciences Unit worked in muffled isolation. The air was damp and soupy, like the inside of a submarine.

On each side of a narrow hallway, there were several offices, each with the same hazy, artificial glow. This far down, sunlight was only a rumor. A few of the desks held big beige computers with green-on-black monitors.

In Special Agent Kenneth Lanning's office, the phone chirped to life, and Lanning (himself big and beige, with jowls and a retreating hairline) reached for the receiver.

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Lanning had come up through the demolition squad, defusing and destroying explosives. Later, he added SWAT training, hostage negotiation, and endless classes on criminal psychology. When he made the jump to teaching, the FBI was just beginning its behavioral science program, later referred to as "profiling." Lanning disliked that term, but it was easier than explaining the details, which made people's eyes glaze over.

While Lanning's peers across the hall focused on serial murder, he dealt with interpersonal violence—what used to be called "sex crimes." He had taught the subject since 1973 and knew it could use an overhaul.

He zeroed in on the worst of the worst: crimes against children.

It might have seemed like the short straw, but Lanning knew it was vital. Crimes against children were incredibly complex, with endless overlapping concerns. Even tireless investigators could find themselves stymied. Looking for new perspectives, Lanning went at it full force, learning everything he could on the subject.

When he wasn't buried in research or training new recruits, Lanning taught a ten-week course for regular cops. Officers came from all over the country, hoping to hone their thinking; later, if those same cops caught an unusual case, they could ring Lanning's office and get his first thoughts, or maybe float a few theories.

Nobody phoned about a standard crime. When you called the FBI, it meant that you were deep in the weeds, and needed some fresh insight. So when Lanning answered the phone in early 1983, he was prepared to hear almost anything.

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It was a police officer calling from New England. He'd just interviewed an adult woman who had a gruesome, detailed story. As a child, she'd been abused by a ring of Satanists, including her own parents. It wasn't just sex, either. The woman described murder, mutilation, and all kinds of blood rites.

Lanning was shocked, but not by the crimes. He'd seen more hell than he cared to remember, and he knew what humans could do to each other. No, it was the *overlap*. Murder, ritual violence, child abuse, and cannibalism—all in one case? That was exceedingly rare. Throw in the group component, and it was almost unheard of.

"I was so concerned," Lanning later said, "that I was determined to do everything I possibly could to help stop, catch, and convict the offenders."

Lanning's first advice was basic but crucial. *Even after all these years, some evidence will still exist. Get as many details from the victim as possible and corroborate the facts.*

Corroboration was key. If even a *few* facts could be proven, cops could scoop up the victim's parents and pressure them to cooperate. Evidence made that far easier.

Hours after the call, Lanning was still rattled. If the woman's claims were true, her case was one of the worst he had ever encountered, and that was saying something. If there was any good news, it was the outlier status. *However long I'm in this job*, thought Lanning, *I'll probably never hear another case like this one.*

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Several weeks later, a lawyer called Lanning for help. An adult woman had approached the attorney with a sickening story of childhood abuse. Blood drinking, ritual mutilation—the worst things you could possibly imagine. The perpetrators were some kind of above-the-law supercult, and the woman was conflicted about going to the police, so she wanted the lawyer's opinion. The lawyer, in turn, wanted Lanning's opinion.

As the lawyer spoke, Lanning rummaged for his notes from the previous cult-murder conversation. "I'm aware of this case," Lanning said. "I've already talked to the investigating officer."

The lawyer said that was impossible. Her client hadn't told the cops.

Lanning asked more questions and realized they were two different cases, with different accusers and different families, in two different states. Only the allegations matched.

Soon, Lanning got a third call with the same basic story: cutting, killing, blood drinking. The location was a day care center.

By this point, Ken Lanning had ten years as a sex-crimes investigator. He knew that evil existed. He'd seen it up close, watched it lean across a prison interview table, manacles tightening, as it walked him through some long-ago bloodbath.

Still, this felt a little thin. How could these groups kill dozens of people every year without drawing attention? And why had they spared these three women?

Maybe they weren't spared. Maybe they escaped.

But that was twenty years ago, when they were still children. If they had escaped, where had they gone after that? And wouldn't a powerful group of murderers (actually *three* powerful groups of murderers) find and kill any stray witnesses?

It didn't make sense. Then again, Manson. Jonestown. That guy in NorCal who'd raped fifty women and counting. The world had its share of monsters, and you prejudged at your own peril.

In the end, it was simple. If these groups existed, they needed to be crushed. Dragged out into the daylight and punished for all to see.

Lanning spent days, then weeks, speaking with social workers, psychologists, and other professionals. A staggering number had heard the same stories. Lanning took notes and asked questions, then he made follow-up calls.

The more he investigated, the more he found a troubling dual consensus.

Evidence? No, not really.

Are the allegations true? Of course they're true.

"I'm not saying every one of them used these words," Lanning later noted, "but the message was, 'We must believe the children.'"

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"Believing the children" really meant believing *adults*. For one thing, most of the initial stories came from grown men and women alleging events of thirty years prior.

Later, when actual children made statements, adults still ran things. They decided what was true and what was fantasy. They decided if a kid was traumatized—or just exhausted from all the freaky questions. Was a child *truly* remembering something or only saying what the shrink (or lawyer, or cop) obviously wanted to hear? Adults made the call.

Believing the children meant believing priests who saw the Devil under every mattress. It meant believing mail-order detectives, including the ones bent on book deals and courtroom fees. It meant believing parents with axes to grind or custody battles to win.

Believing the children meant believing Roland Summit, an influential California psychiatrist who said that kids were essentially *incapable* of lying about abuse.*

For law enforcement, it was a no-win scenario. Every hour spent looking for blood cults was an hour *not* spent on burglaries, or embezzlement, or locking up wife beaters. But you couldn't just ignore parents' claims, even when those claims rang crazy. Parents had long memories, and they got snippy when people didn't pay attention. Annoy them today, and they'd file a complaint tomorrow. And another next week. Eventually, you'd be working a tollbooth in Tupelo.

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Utah County was no different, and when it came to occult-based crime, police walked a delicate line, neither confirming nor denying.

"When *Jay's Journal* came out, a lot of people were concerned," Pleasant Grove Police Chief Mike Ferre told the *Seventh East Press* in 1982, "and since then, we've been keeping an eye out for that kind of thing. I'm not aware of anything in particular, but that doesn't mean it doesn't exist."

In Orem, a stamp-sized adjunct of Provo, police were more active, but only as a pretense. They met with school authorities and made a list of troublemakers. Satanism was a good excuse to rifle through lockers and expel teenage potheads.

For Latter-day Saints, the problem was definitional. What exactly *was* witchcraft? Joseph Smith, who'd founded the Church, had communed with spirits, told fortunes, and used magic rocks called "seer stones" to decipher mystical writing. Was that witchcraft? If not, why not?

What about Ouija boards? They were twelve bucks at Toys 'R' Us, and came from Parker Brothers, makers of *Monopoly* and *Risk*. Were toy

companies agents of darkness? Who could say for sure?

In the end, there were no real measures or guidelines. Faith was fact, fact was subjective, and the standards of truth were eroding.

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* The exceptions, it went without saying, were children who said they *hadn't* been abused, even (or especially) when adults tried to wheedle allegations from them. Those kids were obviously lying, and if you disagreed, maybe *you* were an abuser.

Black Magic Woman

January 1985

Eighteen months after the initial report, Special Agent Kenneth Lanning was drowning in claims of Satanic crime. Calls were coming from everywhere, and more than three dozen police departments wanted help. Swamped and underfunded, Lanning sent word to cops, clinicians, therapists—anybody who might have some insight. *Come to Quantico. Let's share information and get a handle on this.*

With everyone in the same room, Lanning hoped, it would be easier to sort things out. Nonsense would fall by the wayside, freeing up time and money to pursue the real cases. As a bonus, the attendees could return home with some calm, steady logic, and keep their communities from exploding.

That was the plan, anyway.

Monday, February 18, 1985

As the four-day seminar began, Lanning was optimistic. The attendees were standouts, and with their help, he hoped to separate fact from fiction and

fiction from lunacy. Were Satanists killing or otherwise harming children? What was the proof? If it was real, how best to stop it?

Many of Lanning's colleagues weren't looking for proof; instead, they skipped right to belief. As reporter Richard Beck later wrote, "They were eager to hear just how big the ritual abuse problem really was." Not to learn if it actually *existed*—they'd already decided it did—but to hear how far it had spread.

Some of this was expected. Humans tend to work backward from conclusions, keeping what fits and ignoring the rest. Everybody knew this, especially cops and psychologists. The point was to see past it; to guard against your own bias, and go where the evidence took you. *Starting* with a theory, then looking for things to support it? That was disaster on a plate.

And yet, that was what happened. During the Quantico seminar, people easily—almost happily—embraced the idea of a vast Satanic conspiracy.

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One speaker stood out from the others.

Detective Sandra "Sandi" Gallant of the San Francisco Police Department had made her name in the early 1980s, poking around the Bay Area's religious undergrowth. The massacre at Jonestown had scared the whole world, and since most Jonestown members had come from San Francisco, it made sense to look deeper, to see what else might be brewing.

Most of what Gallant found was either boring (Wicca) or campy (Anton LaVey's Church of Satan, which existed mainly to tweak straight society).* But it was enough to raise Gallant's profile within the SFPD.

Over the next four years, Gallant scoured San Francisco for anything vaguely demonic. She didn't find much, but she wrote *lots* of memos, including "Ritual Crime Scene Clues," "Satanic Cults/*Sabbat* Celebrations," and "Colours Significant to Satanism/Witchcraft."

By 1985, Gallant was famous in cop circles, and police from other departments frequently sought her advice. That put her on Kenneth Lanning's radar, and when Lanning scheduled his conference on occult allegations, he asked Gallant to attend.

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Now, as Sandi Gallant spoke, the Quantico audience leaned forward, rapt. She was engaging, with a deep command of her material, and made the supernatural seem commonplace.

This was something Kenneth Lanning hadn't anticipated. Rather than deflating Satanic rumors, the FBI's involvement was making them more plausible. Here, in the very heart of forensic analysis, grown men and women were nodding at phrases like, "Everything Satanists do . . . is done to defame the name of Christ," and, "Christians look for faith, not the obtaining of power."

The problem wasn't Gallant's Christianity (Lanning himself was a lifelong Catholic and former altar boy), but her conflation of religion with science. Faith and proof weren't merely an awkward mix—they were *opposites*, and you had to pick one.

Gallant's handout, the "Ritualistic Crime Profile and Questionnaire," was a hash of factoids and candle-store blather, including a calendar of pagan holy days. There was also a checklist for sorting *actual* Satanic murders from *apparent* Satanic murders ("Were victims forced to devour mutilated parts? Check Yes/No").

Then came a long list of "ritualistic indicators"—clues that someone was a Satanist. Here, the iffy (swastikas, cauldrons) sat side by side with the everyday (cameras, singing).*

Lanning could have cut Gallant short, or confiscated the handouts, but that wasn't his style. Lanning preferred carrots to sticks, and teamwork to turf wars. More to the point, Lanning believed in logic. Empirical fact would rise to the top, and fluff would disappear.

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After four days, the conference concluded. The cops, teachers, and other attendees dispersed, taking home what they'd heard and seen. That included

Gallant's cult-crime handout, which wound up in the hands of civilians who took it at face value. It was, after all, seemingly vetted by the FBI.

Gallant left with something else: a halo of authority. Now she could casually drop phrases like, "As I said at FBI headquarters last month," or, "When the FBI asked me to speak at Quantico . . ."

Three months later, Sandi Gallant was testifying as an "expert witness" in Contra Costa County, east of San Francisco.

According to prosecutors, a local mechanic had abused scores of children, including his own daughter, as part of an elaborate Satanic ritual. The daughter, nine years old, told the court about cannibalism and human sacrifice, and claimed that she herself had once "put a knife right through a baby."

To buttress these claims, prosecutors called Gallant to the stand, and she didn't disappoint.

"Eating and drinking of human waste, abuse of children, and human sacrifice," Gallant testified, referencing her own questionnaire, were "characteristics of Satanic worship."

Was there any evidence that these acts had *happened*? No, but the state was unmoved. "There's no doubt in my mind," said prosecutor Hal Jewett, "that the nine-year-old was a participant in Satanic worship."

The jury split down the middle, and after a long deadlock, the judge declared a mistrial. Prosecutors wanted to refile and do the whole thing again, but the case had already cost too much money.

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Speaking to the *San Francisco Examiner* in 1986, Sandi Gallant was defiant, unwilling to abandon her brand. "For some reason, in the 1980s," she said, "children are being sexually abused, and possibly even murdered, during what appears to be Satanic-type rituals."

Then she said something that should have alarmed everyone.

"The problem," she told the paper, "is we are not finding any bodies. We are not finding any bodies, period."

For most people, a lack of bodies—a lack of *evidence* in general—might have been reason enough to stop, or at least take a long reflective pause. But the growing army of cult cops didn't need proof. They had faith.

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* LaVey, who dubbed himself "the Black Pope" and looked like a bald Vincent Price, was a show tune–loving atheist who believed in neither gods nor devils. Church headquarters (a black-walled house on California Street) was essentially a gothic Playboy Mansion, with LaVey as its cloak-wearing Hefner. No one of importance—not the cops, not the feds, probably not the *actual* pope—considered LaVey or his church a serious threat.

* For more on the 1985 seminar, see Richard Beck's *We Believe the Children* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2015).

Unholy

Sunday, March 3, 1985

When I say the word ‘witch,’” Lynn Allen Bryson told a packed house at the Scera Theater, a seven-hundred-seat venue in Utah County, “people picture a little lady with a black pointed hat, and a hook nose, and a wart, and she’s hovering over a cauldron.”

Bryson, who was forty-six and looked like a rumpled weatherman, shook his head, cuing the audience for something else.

“If you want to see a witch, I mean a *real* one, here’s a picture of a witch.”

He showed a photo of a middle-aged Japanese woman.

“Yoko Ono, wife of John Lennon,” said Bryson. “And John Lennon is a sorcerer.”

Now he had their attention.

“Let me give you some names of other sorcerers,” Bryson continued, switching to a photo of a big-haired blonde. “Georgia Frontiere is a sorceress.” Then, in case anyone wondered: “She owns the Los Angeles Rams.”

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By 1985, Lynn Bryson had spent three decades chasing fame. A string of radio jobs had come and gone, and his music career had fared no better. In the midsixties, he'd released a few singles that went nowhere ("Baby Move In," "Big Mean Drag Machine"), and cowritten some flops for other artists ("Monster Shindig," performed by future Three Dog Night vocalist Danny Hutton). To keep his hand in the game, Bryson had done flat-fee work on children's records, scripting things like *Wilma Flintstone Tells the Story of Bambi*.

A glimpse of success had come in 1966 with a novelty song called "BYU Boy Missionary." The song sold a few thousand copies in Utah, so Bryson left California for Provo, christened himself "the World's Funniest Mormon," and angled for new opportunities.

He managed a few local bands, did music for little-seen movies, and even recorded a concept album: a soft-rock opera about Church founder Joseph Smith. By 1979, Bryson's record label had gone under, and the bank had taken his house.

Luckily for Bryson, a new market was booming, and it came with a captive audience.

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"If you want to see a picture of a sorcerer," Bryson told the teenaged crowd at the Scera Theater, "pick up the album by the Eagles called *Hotel California*. The real 'Hotel California' is headquarters for the first Satanic Church of America."

Bryson glanced around the venue, making sure they all understood.

"This multimillion seller," he said, paraphrasing the title track's lyrics, "says, 'It's easy to get in, but once you're in, you can never leave.' That's because *that* is where human sacrifices are held."*

• • •

Lynn Bryson's "fireside" talk was called "Witchcraft and How It Enters Our Home," and he performed it at Church venues in Utah, Idaho, California, Arizona, and anywhere else that would have him. Afterward, he sold books and cassettes in the lobby, and signed people up for his mailing list. He also peddled his self-published memoir, *Winning the Testimony War*, and his unabridged narration of the Book of Mormon.

But "Witchcraft and How It Enters Our Home" was Bryson's most popular work—a freewheeling montage of dark suburban whispers:

> The words "Stairway to Heaven," when literally translated from witch language, mean "suicide."
>
> Queen has a lyric that says, "And another one bites the dust." You play it backward, and it says, "Start to smoke marijuana."
>
> There is a devil, and you have *got* to stop inviting him into your house. There's a game kids play—it's called *Dungeons & Dragons*. That's one way to invite Satan in.

Dubbed cassettes of "Witchcraft and How It Enters Our Home" passed from teen to teen, spreading through Mormon culture, and one segment in particular quickly grew notorious:

> A young boy in Pleasant Grove, Utah, kept a journal of the events of his life from the time he was an active seminary student. When he left the Church, he just kept writing in the journal. He was visited by several spirits, including one called "Raul." He didn't know who Raul was, but "Raul" is just another name for Lucifer himself. Can you believe that Lucifer himself took the time to come to Pleasant Grove, Utah, to speak to one little kid . . . named Alden Barrett?
>
> The journal he wrote? Well, after he committed suicide, it was made into a book which is published by Dell Books called *Jay's Journal*. It is an account of what is happening thousands and thousands of times a day. If that were an isolated case, where it just happened once, maybe I wouldn't even be giving this talk. But

> spirits are appearing regularly today, throughout the United States and the world.

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* Like most occult “experts,” Bryson had a dramatic origin story. He claimed to have dated Sharon Tate in high school, and, after Tate’s murder, “learned through associates that Charles Manson was into witchcraft, and that he killed Sharon because he needed the blood of a pregnant woman for a ritual.” Bryson’s connection to Tate was tenuous at best: Tate moved frequently, and she attended Bryson’s former high school for only a single year—as a sophomore—by which time Bryson was twenty and living in a different city.

Unsubstantiated Rumors Are Good Enough for Me

Monday, July 29, 1985

The morning sun crested the mountains, flooding Utah County in gold. The air was thick and already warm, on its way to ninety degrees. To the west, vast beds of algae bloomed in Utah Lake, adding a heavy pasture stench.

As they headed for work, walked their dogs, or shooed the kids outside, thirty-five thousand Utahns—including Marcella Barrett—saw the morning paper.

DAILY HERALD

SATAN WORSHIP IN ZION
FIRST IN A SERIES*

• • •

For most of the twentieth century, newspapers were the closest thing to the internet. TV was newer, radio more intimate, movies were bigger and

bolder. Even magazines had better pictures (and *color* pictures, at that). But nothing mattered like newsprint.

Newspapers were portable. Newspapers were updated each morning, and some places had a separate evening edition. If a town could support two competing papers, that meant four news updates a day.

Newspapers were cheap, bordering on free—the advertising saw to that. Sometimes they were *actually* free, passed around the office or left on a bench. You could read them on your own time; no need to be home to catch the 6:00 PM news.

Newspapers even had a prehistoric Comments section: the Letters to the Editor page, where readers weighed in on whatever happened three days ago.

And, like the internet, newspapers had space to fill. Readers wouldn't buy a paper that had nothing *but* advertising, and the more ads you ran, the more you needed other content: comic strips, chess columns, fashion guides, recipes, and whatever else was handy.

When it came to actual news, editors weren't shy about recycling. Papers quoted other papers, or (for a fee) reprinted whole sections of the *New York Times* or *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. Companies like the Associated Press sold access to newswires: proto-fax machines that clacked day and night, ensuring that papers would always have *something* to print. In a pinch, reporters could rehash existing stories, swapping words around and adding their own bylines.

The constant need for material, coupled with a post-Watergate sense of *mission*, didn't always encourage discretion. Who had time? There were scandals to break.

• • •

"Satan Worship in Zion" was a massive, five-day event, running more than fifteen thousand words. Interviewed in 2020, *Daily Herald* reporter Patrick Christian, who coauthored the series, downplayed his own involvement, and credited/blamed colleague Vicki Barker, who died in 2012.

“Vicki either got a tip from somebody,” said Christian, “or had some personal interest in [the story].”

Moments later, Christian expanded on the “tip,” adding, “There was an incident that happened in Pleasant Grove, and a book was written about it called *Jay’s Journal*. Vicki found out about it, and that launched the whole idea.”

Whatever its origin, “Satan Worship in Zion” was a reckless, destructive excuse for journalism, a weeklong exercise in blind quotes and gothic hackwork.

Behold one opening passage:

> Sixteen-year-old Vinceniel,* well on the way to even heavier involvement in Satan worship, finally reached a point of no return. He wanted out . . . The killing of bigger and bigger animals at rituals and the drinking of the animals’ blood was getting to [him].

The story, titled “Animal Killings Scared Teen,” read like Alden Barrett fanfiction—a mash of keywords and plastic thrills, all designed to rattle clueless parents.

Like Jay, “Vinceniel” was a bright Utah County teen; he even wrote poetry. Like Jay, Vinceniel had been lured into Satanism by an older (and possibly gay) male friend. Like Jay, Vinceniel escalated to hex casting, drug abuse, violent orgies, and cow-blood cocktails consumed at the source.

The breaking point, said the *Herald*, had come during “a Satanistic ritual,” when a red glow appeared in one corner of the room. Vinceniel, said the paper, “believes the red glow was Satan himself, or one of his representatives.”†

Despite hinting at human sacrifice, the article lacked dates, real names, or even vague corroboration. Everything happened in “Utah County,” an area covering twenty-one hundred square miles. This, apparently, was how the *Daily Herald* “educated readers about the prevalence of Satanic worship,” and it was only Part One.

Over the next three days, the *Herald* jacked up the fear.

Tuesday, July 30, 1985

County Sheriff's Officers Report Suspected Covens at Ironton Hill

By Vicki Barker
Herald Staff Writer

Utah County Sheriff's Deputy Doug Witney said an old barn and an abandoned two-story house up the road are known sites of previous gatherings suspected to be covens of witches and Satanic priests . . .

Occult: Local Experts Disagree

By Patrick Christian
Herald Staff Writer

The director of a youth group-home in Utah County, who said he did not want to be identified, said, "I believe that 30 percent of those involved in the correctional system in Utah have been deeply involved in Satanism, while 60 percent have some involvement."

Official action is being taken by the Utah County Sheriff's Office to stop the spread of Satanism, according to [the] director of a new Intelligence Unit that is building a file on occult activities . . .

Wednesday, July 31, 1985

Provoan Finds Satanism 'Fantasy,' 'Thing of Escape'

By Vicki Barker
Herald Staff Writer

Judd (a pseudonym) is a developing devil worshipper . . . Born in Provo 22 years ago on the day before Halloween, Judd began his exploration of dark forces while in junior high school in Orem . . .

Prison Psychologist Sees Satanism as Crime Trend

By Patrick Christian
Herald Staff Writer

Prison psychologist Al Carlisle . . . believes Satanism is a crime trend of the future. "The occult is getting into our schools, and not just on a secretive, quiet basis," he said.

Carlisle firmly believes the power Satan's devotees claim to feel is from some real source and is not some self-generated delusion . . .

Thursday, August 1, 1985

Anti-Satanism Lecturer Says He's Anything but Alarmist

By Vicki Barker and Laura Jones
Herald Staff Writers

While nobody disputes the fact that Satanism is a rising influence . . . there is a big difference in the way individuals choose to deal with it.

[S]atanism is a devastatingly evil force that endangers not merely individuals, but society as well, believes Lynn Bryson, a top-selling Mormon author who has traveled to over 300 stakes delivering a powerful message against Satan worship. "The nature of witchcraft," he says, "is that it grows. It's like cancer . . ."

House Father Explains Danger of Dark Worship

> By Patrick Christian
> *Herald* Staff Writer
>
> Burt Headman (a pseudonym), the live-in house father of a home for troubled youth in Utah County . . . has counseled and talked at length with [teenagers] about their involvement in Satanism, rituals and meetings where animals were slaughtered and they witnessed supernatural powers such as levitation . . .

REPORT HINTS AT HUMAN SACRIFICES

> By Vicki Barker
> *Herald* Staff Writer
>
> [A] common Satanic ritual is the lowering of people into a grave inside a coffin with a corpse . . . children, because of their innocence, are favored sacrificial subjects . . .
>
> Orgies, homosexuality, lesbianism, pornography, and child-sex are avenues of expression meant to desecrate flesh, the idea of divine procreation, and faith in God.
>
> Drinking blood and urine and eating flesh, feces, and hearts of humans is also a practice to desecrate God's servants on earth . . .

These weren't maverick stories that somehow *escaped* onto the front page. Every article went up the chain, from reporters Vicki Barker and Pat Christian to City Editor Dick Harmon, and finally to Managing Editor Robert McDougall, the self-described "czar of the newsroom" who had final say on everything. In each case, the stories passed muster and went out to a news-hungry public.

After four days of hair-raising prelude, the *Herald* unleashed its finale.

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* "Zion" = a local nickname for Utah, particularly its heavily-Mormon regions.

* We will address this ridiculous pseudonym shortly.

† Yes, the article's primary source used a pseudonym shouting out to Mötley Crüe vocalist Vince Neil. Also, the misspelling of "Vince Neil" as "Vinceniel" (with its reversed diphthong) is notable given that Alden Barrett's middle name was *Niel*.

Hurt

Friday, August 2, 1985

SATAN WORSHIP IN ZION
YOUTH'S DEATH LEAVES QUESTIONS, WARNING

By Vicki Barker
Herald Staff Reporter

Fourteen years after his death, friends still speak in hushed and careful tones about the teenager's suicide. Don't ask questions, they advise. And stay away from the gravesite.

The tombstone in a Provo cemetery bears a hand-tinted color photograph of the boy, known in this and other stories by a pseudonym, "Jay." The portrait mounted on white porcelain and trimmed in gold, the eyes piercing and unblinking . . .

In case the description of Alden Barrett's tombstone (with its "unblinking" eyes) wasn't enough, the article featured a photo of the granite-and-porcelain marker.

Vicki Barker resumed her scene setting:

> Rumors persist among Utah Valley teens about “suicide clubs” comprised of devil worshippers, and of unsolved murders that are linked to the activities of Satanic cults . . .
>
> Seldom is there reasonable proof that a death may be cult-related. But “Jay” left a diary.
>
> Fourteen years later, people still remember what happened, and hundreds of thousands—maybe millions—of others outside the valley remember too, because the diary was made into a book: *Jay’s Journal*.

Like the rest of “Satan Worship in Zion,” the final installment was filled with pseudonyms and unsourced quotes. These shadowy witnesses had the full scoop; they had seen Jay/Alden conjuring demons, had watched him offer his soul to Satan.*

For the next two thousand words, the paper mixed truth and lies into a single, irresponsible sludge, without even the pretense of fact-checking. No one from the *Herald* contacted the Barretts for comment, or even told them the story was coming.

If this ambush sounds familiar, it should. It was what Beatrice Sparks had done to the Barretts. It was what the *Seventh East Press* had done to the Barretts. It was also a violation of journalistic ethics and a disregard for simple human fairness.

The article’s only trace of sympathy came from a local librarian, who hoped that *Jay’s Journal* would disappear. “I heard this poor, poor family just suffered because of it,” said the woman.

For Marcella Barrett, “Satan Worship in Zion” was another awful surprise. Alden’s suicide had fractured her marriage, and her decision to share the journal with Sparks had only made things worse. Then *Jay’s Journal* appeared, bringing Alden back in the worst way possible. If that weren’t enough, Doyle’s extramarital affair had eventually come to light, and in 1981, he and Marcella had divorced. Now, nearly fifteen years after Alden’s death, a local newspaper was kicking his corpse.

Not long afterward, Marcella stepped outside to get the morning mail. Reaching into the mailbox, she felt something soft, and pulled out a dead rat.

Enough is enough.

She talked to Doyle and Scott about the *Herald* series. Should they contact the paper and demand a retraction?

Before they could decide, another calamity flared.

Alden's tombstone vanished.

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* This slippery, uncheckable approach owed partially to Watergate, a scandal uncovered with help from nicknamed informants ("The Bookkeeper," "Z," the infamous "Deep Throat"). In the end, however, Richard Nixon's corrupt presidency was cut short by incriminating audiotapes, or what nattering purists call "evidence."

Dead and Gone

Pleasant Grove City Cemetery sits in the middle of a quiet neighborhood, and has no gates or fences. It's a big, open stretch of welcoming grass and lazy, low-slung trees, and looks like a small, well-tended park, until you see the headstones. Even then, the feeling is tranquil, especially at night, when the eastern mountain range—so close it looks like a rumpled brown wall—brings a spectral hush.

Houses flank the cemetery on three of four sides, and some are only three hundred feet away. From inside those homes, you can see across the grounds, clear to the other side. Alden Barrett's grave, meanwhile, is just one hundred feet from the cemetery's edge, and most of the surrounding plots have flat, horizontal markers. Anyone standing there is easily spotted.

But shortly after the *Herald*'s awful crescendo, someone (probably multiple someones) drove onto the cemetery grass, parked at Alden's grave, loaded up the seven-hundred-pound granite slab, and drove away, leaving deep tire tracks, all without being seen or heard.

The neighbors were sick of Alden's dark celebrity and the weirdos it brought to his gravesite. Now, someone had taken care of that, and nobody saw a thing.

The Barretts geared up to file a report, but didn't get the chance. Just a day later, the headstone reappeared, only now it was facing the wrong direction. Once again, the activity went unnoticed.

Doyle and Marcella were beside themselves. The *Daily Herald* series was bad enough; now this. They scheduled a family meeting, and invited

Scott and Elaine, plus a few other relatives.

Then they invited Beatrice Sparks.

In This House That I Call Home

Late August 1985

The sign out front still said “Barrett,” but it was really just Marcella. Doyle was remarried and living a few miles away. Elaine had a new life with her husband, Mike. Scott had married, divorced, and married again. But Marcella was still in the house on 550 South. It was full of ghosts, but at least they were family.

Doyle and Scott arrived early; there were things to decide before Sparks showed up.

First, Alden’s tombstone. Returned or not, someone had carted it off like a load of trash, and it could happen again. Forget the work Doyle had put into designing it. Forget the cost. It was just *wrong*. You didn’t steal someone’s headstone.

Maybe it was time to move Alden’s body; bury it somewhere else, without a marker. *Find it now, you little bastards.*

But exhumation was a major step, with lots of big, bad images. And it wouldn’t work anyway: someone would notice, and word would spread, and the vandalism would start again. The only way to keep it secret would be moving the body at night, and that was too morbid to contemplate.

They decided to split the difference. They’d leave Alden where he was, and put the headstone itself in storage. That would make the grave harder to

find and keep the headstone from wandering off again, or being spray-painted or damaged. Maybe, someday, they could put it back out.

Next, the *Daily Herald*. Bad enough that Beatrice Sparks had depicted the Barretts as Mormon Munsters, but a professional newspaper? The *Herald* had spent five days on the Satan-worship series, and never even asked the Barretts to comment. There was nothing about Alden's real-life struggles or about him as a person, just a lot of fear and gossip. And anyone who trusted the paper might believe it all.

They drafted a letter to the *Daily Herald*, demanding a full retraction and a public apology. They signed their names and addressed it for mailing.

A few minutes later, Beatrice Sparks arrived.

• • •

She looked done up, with lacquered nails and bouffant hair. Marcella did her best to be polite, and welcomed her inside.

Seven years had passed since Sparks unleashed *Jay's Journal*, turning Alden into some kind of demon. Now, at last, the Barretts could ask her *why*. Why make a sad, short life even worse? And why hadn't she warned them? Did she know what she'd done, what she'd caused? Did she even care?

No one quite knew where to start, so they asked her flat out. *Where did all that occult stuff come from? Where did you get it?*

Sparks had a ready answer: *Jay's Journal* was actually a mix of three separate diaries from three separate people. One was Alden, and the other two were "close friends."

If the Barretts had known more about Sparks's past, they might have laughed. Once again, she couldn't keep her own story straight. First, it was only Alden's diary, and she'd merely "corrected the punctuation." Now it was three different journals stitched together.

The Barretts pushed for specifics, but Sparks hijacked the conversation, pulling out a stack of papers and handing them around.

Book reviews. Sparks had brought reviews of *Jay's Journal* into Marcella Barrett's house, and passed them out like homework.

Before anyone could speak, Sparks handed out more papers. These were letters from readers, all of them gushing over *Jay's Journal*. As an extra stab, some of the letters asked Sparks to "thank Jay's mother" for them.

The moment was slipping away. Sparks was cool mercury, shifting and formless, impossible to grab.

Now Doyle was talking. He didn't ask Sparks to pull *Jay* off the market, but to at least make it more accurate. Teen suicide was a massive problem, and maybe they could do something about it, *if* they were honest.

Sparks responded like stepping on an ant. Changing the book, she said, would make it dishonest. A fabrication.

Scott couldn't take any more. "I want to write my own book," he said.

That stopped things.

"I want to write a book about what really happened. About the real Alden."

Everybody spoke at once, and things got heated. No one else thought it was a good idea. Even Marcella was opposed.

Marcella hated confrontation. It had taken her years to face Beatrice Sparks, and now that it was happening, she just wanted it to be over. She was drained—from the suicide, from the book, from the divorce, from everything. Sparks was a fighter, and seemed to thrive on conflict. Marcella was different, and her energy was gone.

"No," said Marcella. "Just . . . leave it alone."

Things deflated from there, and Sparks eventually left. Later, she said the Barretts were "in denial" about Alden.

• • •

Scott was through with his parents. He was through with their weakness and inaction, with their unbelievable passivity, and he was through with their Church. He walked out the door, and renounced them all.

His second marriage ended, and he felt the undertow. One night, he loaded up on beer and started driving.

Utah is creased by canyons and ravines, and the corkscrew roads are drop-offs; sheer walls down into nothing. As darkness fell, Scott wound his

way upward, taking long, wide turns, finally stopping at a cliff edge.

He sat for two hours, revving up the engine, then killing it, then doing it all again.

Come on.

He started the car and put it in gear.

Now.

He pictured himself at age eleven, finding Alden's body. Then he saw his own two sons and imagined their reactions.

He turned off the car and sobbed. Even suicide was off the table. There was no way out.

When he felt okay to drive again, he zagged back down the canyon road and went to a friend's house. They stayed up all night, talking it through.

• • •

Decades earlier, after Beatrice Sparks's father had walked out, her family had splintered, with everyone fleeing the tiny enclave of Logan, Utah. "We wanted to go," as Sparks later put it, "where there wouldn't be so much gossip about our family."

Now the Barretts were doing the same, with Doyle over in American Fork, Elaine married and moving away, and Scott here and there, wherever the wind took him.

In time, Marcella gave in, leaving Pleasant Grove in a bid to escape the whispers. The Barretts had been the first residents of the house on 550 South, the first to live and grieve there. The first to do it all. Now the house was empty, a shell with no one to protect.

Kids still wandered by, stopping to stare from the sidewalk, but they saw only weeds and empty windows. Out front, the "Barrett" nameplate slowly vanished, hidden by ugly overgrowth.

Marcella found an apartment ten minutes away. Far enough to have new neighbors and a chance of blending in, but close enough to visit Alden's grave. Even without the headstone, she knew where he was buried.

In God We Trust, Inc.

September 1988

Onstage, a sweating, dumpling-shaped man stood behind a wide, black altar. Spread out before him were knives, candles, and a human skull. The candles looked like bats; the knives were curved and stained.

As he spoke to the crowd—around seventy-five people—the man dropped his voice, letting the words ring with dark authority. “There is cannibalism,” he said, “and an underground market for human bones.”

The crowd shifted and gave a low rumble.

“And candles,” he added, “made from baby fat.”

The crowd inhaled, a great vacuum of revulsion.

A few years earlier, Tom Wedge had been a juvenile probation officer. That didn’t pay very well, and the kids were a hassle. If you were lucky, and stuck it out for thirty years, you’d get a small pension, then be forgotten.

Wedge’s new job was much better. He charged $350 a head, so this presentation would clear him $26,000, most of it from state and county budgets.

“What color candles do Satanists prefer?” Wedge asked the crowd.

“Black,” came several shouts.

People always said black; that’s why they needed Tom Wedge.

“Nope,” said Wedge. “It’s purple.”

Ah. The scratch of notes everywhere.

The audience was mostly cops and social workers, but there were usually a handful of civilians—people who had read about Wedge in the local paper. At the end of three days, everyone received a small diploma declaring them a fully qualified occult-crime investigator.

• • •

By the mid-1980s, consulting on Satanic crime was a lucrative business, and dozens of cult cops worked the circuit. Many had no real training, and more than a few had literal mail-order degrees.

In Ohio, nebbishy police officer Dale Griffis enrolled in a correspondence course, and soon acquired a PhD in “cult studies” from Columbia Pacific University, a sleazy diploma mill later shut down by the state of California. Most people only saw the letters “PhD,” and Griffis leveraged his faux degree into a whole new career as a trial consultant, expert witness, and all-around hero.

Griffis had the requisite spooky backstory: he frequently mentioned an (unnamed) teenage boy who’d committed suicide after falling into Devil worship. The boy’s death had transformed Griffis, who’d subsequently pledged his life to fighting Satanic crime.

“I like going to an area where I can do my thing and leave and ride out on a white horse and never be seen again,” Griffis told a reporter in 1985.

All over the country, police departments obliged, asking Griffis for advice. This sometimes backfired, as when Toledo cops spent three days excavating three different “grave sites” (read: vacant lots) in a search for human corpses. Griffis speculated that “as many as seventy-five people” had been sacrificed and buried at one or all of the sites.

Dozens of news stories later, police had found rocks, dirt, garbage, an old broken doll, and, trailing from a tree, a single piece of red string.

“Red string,” Griffis informed the Associated Press, was “used in Satanic rituals, and often marks the boundaries of graves or other ritual sites.”

Similar debacles happened in town after town. Nobody wanted to look like a chump, so when searches came up empty, the definitions expanded.

Better to find something—*anything*—than admit you'd been swindled.

When teens were involved, things got even more vague. Depending on the source, signs that a teenager was involved in Devil worship included the following:

- listening to heavy metal
- playing fantasy and/or occult-themed games
- reading books by Stephen King
- skepticism toward organized religion
- skepticism toward patriotic ideals
- talking in rhyme
- owning bells or gongs
- black clothing
- silver jewelry
- heavy makeup
- a strong belief in individualism
- intense introspection
- clove cigarettes

The list was effectively endless, and sometimes doubled back on itself. A church in Wisconsin added "an unusual interest in the Bible," "an obsession with Jesus Christ," and "a preference for New Age 'mood' music."

For a certain kind of teen, this was like finding a battle plan. Here was a list of ways to frighten and/or annoy adults—a list the *adults themselves* had compiled.

In the 1970s, British punks, Jewish and Gentile alike, had outraged straight society by sporting swastikas. Critics and codgers went berserk, which was (of course) the goal.

A decade later, heavy metal bands were the chain yankers *par excellence*, slapping Devil horns and "666" onto everything from bandanas to bracelets. The apotheosis arguably came with Mötley Crüe's *Shout at the Devil*, whose front cover was simply a giant black pentagram set against an even blacker background.

Teens paid their money; adults lost their minds. It was almost too easy.

But there was a catch. Screwing with grown-ups only worked if the grown-ups *believed* it. And the more they believed, the more they acted like crazy, destructive children.

The Mob Rules

September 1988

CALDWELL COUNTY, KENTUCKY—Rumors of planned attacks by Satanists sweep through several towns, including Princeton, where Devil worshippers will supposedly target “blonde, blue-eyed teenagers.”

By midday on September 16, more than twelve hundred Caldwell County students have either fled their schools or been kept home by parents, and by nightfall, local gun stores are sold out. The much-feared attack never happens.

Over the next six weeks, rumors that Satanists “will murder blonde, blue-eyed children” spread to Wisconsin, Kansas, Wyoming, Pennsylvania, and Indiana. Hoping to quell the growing hysteria, police in two dozen counties hold public meetings. The gatherings only accelerate the panic, and gun sales skyrocket as citizens form vigilante groups.

The Satanists never appear, but suspicion lingers. In northeast Indiana, several local businesses are accused of conducting “secret Satanic rituals in basements.”

February 1990

CAROLINE COUNTY, MARYLAND—After a spate of handgun suicides, rumors of adolescent Satanism spread through the community, replete with talk of moonlight rituals and animal sacrifice.

Christian Jensen, the State's Attorney, downplays the occult angle. "It's easy to say the Devil did it," says Jensen, "rather than face up to the facts." This infuriates many local parents, and hundreds crowd into town meetings, insisting that the teens' deaths were influenced by "something far more sinister."

"There's a strong force that is causing [kids] to kill themselves," says one woman. Other parents agree, and several mention "occult practices involving Ouija boards and heavy metal rock music."

Three weeks later, another teenage boy kills himself with a handgun.

In the next budget rollback, the state cuts 25 percent from school programs intended to prevent child abuse, teen pregnancy, and teenage suicide.

August 1983–July 1990

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA—Following a single accusation by an alcoholic parent who suffers from psychosis, authorities investigate the staff of McMartin Preschool, and eventually conclude that 360 children were raped during sacrificial "Satanic rites." After filing 321 charges against seven adults, prosecutors learn about the initial accuser's mental illness, but withhold the information from defense lawyers.

As the case unfolds, therapists pressure children to "affirm and repeat" unprovable claims. (When one child won't affirm suggestions of abuse, a therapist responds, "Well, what good are you? You must be dumb.") Soon enough, the children describe flying witches, hot-air balloon rides, and toddlers being flushed down toilets into secret rooms.

Media coverage intensifies, and similar cases—with similar allegations—erupt in dozens of cities. "It can't just be a coincidence that kids are telling these same stories across the country," Detective Sandi Gallant tells

the *San Francisco Examiner*. “The rituals are detailed and very consistent. A young child could not make them up.”*

After seven years and fifteen million dollars, the state finally drops all charges. It is the longest, costliest trial in California history. Central defendants Ray and Peggy Buckey have lost their business, gone broke, and spent five years in jail—all without being convicted of anything.

Years later, the recantations begin, with multiple accusers (and even a prosecutor) admitting the sham.

September 1992

AUSTIN, TEXAS—Dan and Fran Keller, the owners of a small day care center in Austin’s Oak Hill suburb, are accused of Satanic ritual abuse. Among the allegations: forcing children to drink blood-laced Kool-Aid, cutting out the heart of a baby, throwing children into a shark-filled swimming pool, and “using Satan’s arm as a paintbrush.”

The initial accuser retracts her statement, as does the primary “eyewitness,” but it doesn’t matter. Jurors convict the Kellers, who spend twenty-two years in prison before an appeals court overturns their sentences, freeing the couple.

In 2017, district attorney Margaret Moore finally declares both Dan and Fran Keller “actually innocent.”

June 1993

WEST MEMPHIS, ARKANSAS—A trio of young men (later known as the West Memphis Three) are charged with a savage triple murder. The prosecution paints the crime as Satanic and the defendants as Devil worshippers. Evidence for this claim includes a love of heavy metal, a mostly black wardrobe, and a fondness for Stephen King.

The prosecution's "expert witness" is mail-order PhD Dale Griffis, who regales the court with exotic interpretations of teenage graffiti and notebook doodles.

There is no physical evidence against the defendants, and many clues point to a different suspect. Nonetheless, jurors convict all three men and sentence one of them, Damien Echols, to death. The trio spend nearly twenty years in prison before their convictions are *de facto* overturned.

April 1994–August 1995

WENATCHEE, WASHINGTON—In a town of just twenty-five thousand people, prosecutors charge forty-three adults (most of them poor and some actually illiterate) with *29,726* counts of ritual abuse.

More than two dozen people are convicted. Several have mental disabilities; some can scarcely comprehend the proceedings.

In 1996, the prosecution's thirteen-year-old star witness admits to fabricating the accusations and publicly apologizes. She had concocted the claims to please her foster father, a policeman who was also the case's lead investigator.

In 1998, the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* prints a devastating five-part investigation, exposing rampant misconduct by Wenatchee police, prosecutors, and therapists. Among the revelations: "Some children were told they would be kept in a psychiatric hospital until they said they had been abused."

It takes the state another three years to release the last of the defendants.

• • •

Journalists Shirley Downing and Tom Charlier, who cover the West Memphis Three case for the *Tennessee Commercial Appeal*, later estimate

that between 1983 and 1987 alone, similar allegations plagued more than one hundred US communities.

Such cases were “not really about ritual child abuse at all,” write Downing and Charlier. “They [were] about the dangers of popular justice, the presumption of guilt, and a less-than-skeptical press.”

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* The logical misfires deployed by cult cops could fill a separate book, but this particular trap (“all the allegations are similar, so they must be true”) is the sort of thing that even first-year psych students roll their eyes at. Quick: picture a standard-issue, probe-happy alien—the kind that snatches rednecks from back-country roads. Does your alien have a teardrop face, elongated frame, and large, dark eyes? It does? Apparently we’ve both been abducted.

All Together Now

Wednesday, February 17, 1988

Oprah Winfrey looked into the camera, her mint-green pantsuit offset by a gray turtleneck and strand of pearls.

"My next guest," she said, "found herself part of a group of young women and children forced to surrender their bodies in some of *the* most evil rituals imaginable."

"Her own child was used in a human sacrifice ritual," Oprah continued. "It was only three years ago that Lauren Stratford—"

The shot switched to a midthirties woman with big plastic glasses, tight blond curls, and a tiny hyphen of a mouth.

"—gained the courage to talk about her horrifying experiences publicly."

Even by daytime-talk standards, this introduction was amazing. Apart from "my next guest," *every single word* was false. Not questionable or misleading, but provably wrong.

By the time she appeared on *Oprah*, Lauren Stratford had become a kind of horseshit savant, lying about everything you could imagine, and a few things you probably couldn't.

At various points, Lauren Stratford (born Laurel Willson) had falsely accused her father, brother-in-law, and several teachers of rape. When none of that stuck, she accused her stepmother of selling her into prostitution.

(Fact-check: Stratford didn't *have* a stepmother.) Stratford told long, detailed yarns about razor attacks and forced enemas—tales she'd lifted from *Sybil*, a fraudulent bestseller about multiple-personality disorder. Later, she described being seduced by a group of lesbians at the Assembly of God church.

Best of all, Stratford once pretended to be *blind*, bumping around the house of an older couple who had let her move in for a while. When Stratford accidentally pointed out a local landmark, the couple asked her to leave.

Starting in 1984, Stratford spiced her stories with Satanism, leveraging each bit of attention into bigger and better exposure, finally landing a book deal for *Satan's Underground: The Extraordinary Story of One Woman's Escape*.

By 1988, Stratford was a popular speaker at Satanic Crime seminars and survivors' conferences, and gave long interviews to journalists, spinning tales of underground mayhem.

Like Beatrice Sparks, Stratford couldn't keep her facts together. She told Oprah that three of her children had been stolen by Satanists, but later told a different interviewer that it was only *one* child. At other times, Stratford claimed to be childless and sterile.

• • •

By 2003, Oprah Winfrey would be the first Black female billionaire, and powerful beyond calculation, but even in 1988, she was one of the nation's most trusted faces. Oprah's actions mattered. And on that February day, she tacitly endorsed Lauren Stratford's bloody tale, sending it out to ten million viewers.*

Talking with Stratford, Oprah's voice went through all the stages of talk-show response: formal, incredulous, angry, somber. Then she plunged into the seedy, hidden world of "breeders"—captive women who pumped out babies for the sole purpose of Satanic sacrifice.

"Breeders" were a ham-fisted solution to Sandi Gallant's "we're not finding any bodies" problem. How do you kill fifty thousand people a year

(the number alleged by many cult cops) without being noticed? Simple: grow your own victims.[†]

It was all rubbish, of course. Lauren Stratford was mentally ill, and needed help—actual, *real* help. But no one dared say it, because (1) it might have seemed rude, and (2) her story made great television.

It was the same thing plaguing American teens, who were still killing themselves in record numbers. Adults, desperate for simple explanations (and/or a quick buck), had embraced the occult-suicide theory, pushing away real-life complexities.

Strung out? Bipolar? Confused about your identity? Sorry, we can't help you—we're busy chasing vampires and banning Dragonlance.

• • •

Several years later, Lauren Stratford resurfaced as "Laura Grabowski" and claimed to be an Auschwitz survivor. Instead of demonic snuff films, she described gruesome torture at the hands of Josef Mengele, and took thousands of dollars from Jewish charities, including a Holocaust survivors' fund.

The internet was relatively new, and it would take a few years for Stratford's myriad lies to surface. In the meantime, she had a pat reply for anyone who doubted: "I think only the individual can decide if he/she is a survivor."

Even after her story unraveled, Stratford's defenders were legion. One of the loudest was Gregory Reid, an author and youth pastor with memories of childhood abuse. According to Reid, these memories had been repressed until 1981, when a book brought them forth.

"*Jay's Journal*," wrote Reid in his memoir, *Nobody's Angel*, "shook me to the core, because it could have been my story, and because it kindled a fire in me to get kids out of the occult. But the disturbing elements of Jay's ritualistic involvement shook me even harder. I *knew* this stuff somehow."

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* Oprah's interview with Lauren Stratford is sometimes dated to May 1989; the official transcript service gives the date as February 17, 1988.

† Like all conspiracy peddlers, cult cops didn't have *one* explanation for things; they had a smorgasbord of "maybes." Depending on whom you asked, Satanists also (a) ate the bodies, (b) burned the bodies in mobile crematoria, (c) turned the bodies into candles/ashtrays/decorative knickknacks, or (d) fed the bodies to pigs.

Doctored

December 1988

Beatrice Sparks was at home, viewing artwork for a new edition of *Jay's Journal*: a paperback from Pocket Books.

The timing was ideal. Across America, teenage deviltry was filling headlines and frightening grown-ups. The latest issue of *Woman's Day* featured "A Parent's Primer on Satanism," which warned that "bright, bored, underachieving, talented, and even gifted teens are susceptible to cults."

Best of all, the Barretts were neutralized, and it had only cost her a visit. Not a retraction or even an apology. They'd worn themselves out, and then she'd left.

Good thing, too. She'd already sold the movie rights to *Jay's Journal*.

Back in 1979, Casablanca FilmWorks (the company behind *Midnight Express*, an Oscar-nominated hit) had optioned *Jay* for a TV movie, but the deal fell through, so the rights went back to Sparks. Now she'd sold them again, this time to a Canadian screenwriter who paid her twenty grand. And if the movie didn't happen within a few years, she could keep the money and sell the rights a *third* time.

The Barretts might complain, but probably not. They'd had their chance to stand up, and instead, they'd buckled.

• • •

As snow fell outside, Sparks surveyed *Jay*'s new cover art. It was a nod to *Go Ask Alice*, with dark hues and a half-shadowed face.

The real change was the credit.

Jay's Journal
by Anonymous
Edited by Dr. Beatrice Sparks

She'd been saying it for years: "Dr. Beatrice Sparks." No one had objected or even raised an eyebrow. Now, with the Barretts handled, why hold back?

She planned to get a real degree, someday. Brigham Young University was just three miles away. Maybe she'd actually enroll, do things the proper way, however long it took.

Of course, there were colleges that did it all by mail—even PhDs—and she *had* volunteered at the Provo hospital, which might count for something. True, that was decades ago, but so what? Learning was learning.

In the meantime, she'd push the limits and make people *ask* for proof. Nobody would, she was sure of that. Asking for proof was impolite.

And it wasn't like Pocket Books would balk. If they had some hang-up about lying, they wouldn't be publishing *Jay* to begin with. They were in it together.

She made a few notes, then approved the artwork.

Dr. Beatrice Sparks.

That was nice. Had a good ring to it.

Part Five

Shine a Light

For My Next Trick, I'll Need a Volunteer

Let's pretend it's 1993.

You are an editor at Avon Books, a division of Hearst Publishing.* Every day, proposals and pitches arrive by the dozen. Only a few get any response; most are filed and forgotten. Prepping a book for market is a long, arduous process, and you pick your projects carefully.

One day, an agent pitches something intriguing: a new diary from Beatrice Sparks, the woman behind *Go Ask Alice*.

You check the numbers. After more than twenty years, *Alice* is still selling fifteen hundred copies a week.

Sure, you say. *I'll take a look.*

Soon, you receive a copy of a very short diary. Its contents are direct and crushing.

"Nancy" is fourteen. Sweet and trusting, she falls for an older man. At first, he seems protective, but it's an act. After giving Nancy a spiked wine cooler, he rapes her. Even worse, the man has AIDS, and soon, so does Nancy.

As her life spirals toward darkness, Nancy battles depression and physical torment. Buoyed by faith and family, she slowly accepts her fate, and dies with a measure of peace.

• • •

It's timely, for sure. In 1993, AIDS is gouging its way through America, turning humans into scarecrows. Already, it's the leading killer of men aged twenty-five to forty-four. By 1995, it will be the leading killer of *all* Americans in that bracket.

Even children aren't spared. In Indiana, thirteen-year-old Ryan White is fighting to stay in school after catching AIDS from a blood transfusion. His teachers, classmates, and several dozen parents have signed a petition to keep him out, and if that doesn't work, they plan to start a private school—one that Ryan can't attend.

Yes, you think, *Nancy's story could matter*. And there's that pedigree. "From the woman who brought you *Go Ask Alice*." That will get people to at least notice the book, and maybe pick it up, or scan the back cover. Do that, and you're halfway to a sale.

True, the diary's language is a little . . . off. Nancy doesn't write like a teenager. Not a modern teenager, anyway. Take the entry from June 12:

> Oh, what a beautiful day. The beginning of a future that is going to be more glorious than has ever been known by mankind since the beginning of the Earth . . . as well as all the other creations of infinity.

But there's no fighting the math. *Go Ask Alice* is still selling and has massive name recognition across two generations. *Alice* will open doors.

Management agrees, and soon it's decided. Avon Books will acquire the diary, fix it up, and publish it as *It Happened to Nancy*.

Now comes the work—the long, slow process of smoothing out the kinks to make the whole thing readable. It's a partnership: you and Beatrice Sparks, sending things back and forth, shaping the final product.

Tuesday, June 29, 1993

You open a letter from Beatrice Sparks. It's on custom stationary; the heading reads, "Beatrice Mathews Sparks, PhD."

Did she have a PhD before? Well, it's been a few years since her last book. Maybe she went back to school. Good for her.

Sparks weighs in regarding *Nancy*'s subtitle:

> Front Cover
>
> Nancy's folks and I prefer:
> A TRUE STORY
> FROM THE DIARY OF A TEENAGER WHO LOOKED FOR LOVE . . .
> AND FOUND DEATH THROUGH AIDS
> It must say: Edited by Beatrice Sparks, Ph.D. on the front cover.

Friday, July 23, 1993

The sales department has some worries. Putting a grown-up's name on the cover might scare kids away. It would look much better with just "true story" and "teenage diary," and the other selling points. Nothing formal or adult. That worked for *Alice*, right?

Maybe you can strike a balance, putting Sparks's name on the *back* cover, but in big letters. That should make everyone happy.

You send the idea to Beatrice Sparks.

Monday, July 26, 1993

The fax machine squeals to life, shoving out thin sheets of crinkly paper. One by one, they curl and drop into a pile.

It's your letter to Sparks, with handwritten notes all over it:

> What kids Don't know Can HURT THEM!

> Kids respect Education
>
> You'd be surprised how many want to be psychologists or therapists of some kind.

Next to your suggestion about keeping the cover "grown-up-free," there's another long scrawl:

> When kids find a "grown up" they trust—they trust completely! My problem is trying to get away from them after a month in session.

"After a month in session"? She must mean with her teenage patients. She *is* a PhD.

Friday, October 1, 1993

A doctor from the CDC is vetting the manuscript, making sure the AIDS information is correct. At least, that's *supposed* to be happening. Sparks is the go-between, and she says she already sent you the doctor's approval, but it never arrived. Maybe it got lost in delivery. You make a note to ask again.

But there's a bigger issue.

You have a copy of Nancy's diary, plus the updated manuscript from Sparks, and you're checking them side by side, looking for stray mistakes, when you notice something strange. On page 79 of the manuscript, a whole section has been altered. Nancy's original entry is short—just a few lines—but in the manuscript, it runs for nearly a page, and most of it seems brand new.

You keep reading, and find more long passages that weren't there before.

You phone Beatrice Sparks. She doesn't answer, and her machine is turned off, so the phone just rings. You hang up, then write a brief letter, asking about the CDC vetting *and* about the strange new material.

“There are some pretty huge chunks that don’t seem to exist in the journal at all,” you write. “Were these moved from another section of Nancy’s journal?”

Sparks is smart; she’ll read between the lines. All she has to do is say “yes.”

Tuesday, October 5, 1993

Once again, Sparks sends your own letter back to you, covered with notes.

At the bottom is a whole paragraph about the new material:

> IT HAPPENED TO NANCY is a compilation from her diaries, note scribblings on margins, interviews with family, friends and teachers, and over forty tapes which I made. I thought you understood that. Never did I say it was word to word hers. I put her thoughts and materials together as I thought they would best tell her story.

Then:

> Sorry if you misunderstood.

Mid-October 1993

You’re reading the manuscript again. In places, Nancy’s diary resembles *Go Ask Alice*, and even *Jay’s Journal*. Phrases and quirks seem to repeat, sometimes in near-identical wording.

> *Jay*: I remember a speaker at a conference said that bad thoughts are like birds . . . we can’t keep them from flying over our heads but we can keep them from nesting in our hair.

> *Nancy*: She said she understood what I was saying, but that kids had to learn that they "couldn't keep birds from flying over their heads, but they could keep them from making nests in their hair."

Late October 1993

Cover blurbs from other authors are important. They get people's attention and give a project more weight. Quotes from experts help, too.

For *It Happened to Nancy*, Sparks has obtained glowing quotes from two doctors. You read the first one:

> "Only when one has been intimately involved with a real AIDS-infected person like Nancy can one slightly comprehend the overwhelmingness of the disease."
>
> —Milton Norbaum, MD, AIDS Specialist

"AIDS Specialist" sounds a little general. Is that a real title?

And "overwhelmingness"? Perhaps Dr. Norbaum has spent too much time with Beatrice Sparks, who slaps "-ness" on every other word: "exoticness," "delectableness," "absoluteness," "amazingness."

You read the second blurb:

> "*It Happened to Nancy* is a deeply disturbing book because it faces AIDS honestly, realistically and head-on.
>
> Up to 30 percent of people who have AIDS are diagnosed in their twenties, which means most were infected in their teens."
>
> —Dorean Hadley Staudacher, Psychiatrist working with AIDS

Again with the vague titles. "Psychiatrist working with AIDS"? What does that mean?

At least Sparks answered your question about the AIDS vetting, though it's a little terse:

> Everything is approved by the CDC.

December 1993

You're reviewing the completed manuscript. Realistically, this is your final chance to pull it back or make any changes.

The foreword is blunt and seems to start in midthought:

> FOREWORD
> Precious little fourteen-year-old Nancy's tragic battle with AIDS becomes all the more tragic because of her extremely lowered natural immune system, which allowed the virus to so quickly ravage her delicate body. Ordinarily the latency period from infection to symptoms for AIDS is considered to be from five to ten years.

It's confusing, but eventually makes sense. In most cases, it takes up to a decade for HIV to become AIDS, and another few years for AIDS to kill you. Nancy's *whole diary* is only two years long, and her battle with AIDS was even shorter: she went from infection to death in just twenty-three months. So, she . . . what? Had a broken immune system to start with? That must be it.

The foreword ends:

> I worry about all the beautiful, innocent young Nancys.
> —Dr. Dathan Sheranian (one of Nancy's doctors)

"One of Nancy's doctors"? Is Sparks being purposely fuzzy?

• • •

By now, you know the manuscript inside and out, but last looks are always a good idea, so you read it one last time.

The arc is simple and sad:

Nancy falls prey to an older man who rapes her, infecting her with HIV. After hearing the diagnosis, Nancy grows bitter, hating everything she sees, including herself. To get a change of scenery, she visits her aunt and uncle's ranch in Idaho. All the while, she keeps journaling, even as her body starts to fail.

Toward the diary's conclusion, you see these entries:

> *Sunday, March 22, 9:30* PM
>
> This afternoon, Aunt Thelma called a lady she thinks I would like to know. She's going to fly up in a few days. Aunt Thelma won't tell me who it is, but she says it's going to be a VERY SPECIAL, WONDERFUL surprise! Who could it be? Hmmm—my mom? No, she would have told me. Dad? No, he's not a woman. I guess I'll just have to wait and see.
>
> *Tuesday, April 7*
>
> Oh, Self:
>
> I've had the most lovely day. Mr. Pederson brought Aunt Thelma's friend in on the helicopter, which he only does on very special occasions.
>
> I can't believe that the lady was Dr. B., who put together one of my favorite books, *Go Ask Alice*, from the diary of a girl my age who had gotten into drugs.

You're reading this manuscript in late 1993. There is no internet to speak of, and Beatrice Sparks ("Dr. B."? When did that start?) hasn't published a book in fifteen years. *Go Ask Alice* is still famous, but outside of Mormon circles, Sparks is basically unknown. Yet when Sparks arrives (in a helicopter!), Nancy, who is literally on her deathbed, does everything but cartwheel.

You keep reading:

> As soon as Aunt Thelma introduced us and told me about Dr. B., I knew what they were thinking immediately! Ever since I first found out I had AIDS, I've wished, like everything, that I had someone to talk to about it, someone who could answer my questions, or at least question my answers.
>
> After a few minutes, Aunt Thelma excused herself and went up to the house, leaving me and Dr. B. to talk about . . . my book!!! It seemed unreal, but Dr. B. assured me it was as real a possibility as I was.

That last sentence isn't just awkward, it's loopy, like something from Lewis Carroll.

Now you're at the wrap-up, where Nancy gives her diary to—*ahem*—"Dr. B.":

> I felt like we had been friends forever, like we were long-lost relatives or something. She said Aunt Thelma had called her and said it might be good for me to unload my pain and strain with someone who was knowledgeable.
>
> Maybe I can do something in some way to help other kids who are in my situation.

It's no shock that Nancy dies. AIDS is a bullet, and effective treatment is still years away. There's also been some foreshadowing: Nancy's dog, Red Alert, died a few pages earlier (a ranch hand named Melvin built the tiny coffin), and Nancy's cat, Cougar, is slowly winding down.

Still, the curtain falls without warning:

> EPILOGUE
>
> Nancy died in her sleep April 12th—two days after her last entry.
>
> She is buried next to Uncle Rod in the center of the Sacred Fir Tree Circle. Red Alert's grave is close to Nancy's feet, and ailing

> Cougar will be buried beside him.
>
> On Nancy's wooden tombstone Melvin carved: THERE WILL NEVER BE ANOTHER NANCY

They buried her in the *woods*?

Thursday, January 20, 1994

With the book slated for a Spring release, Avon's promo department needs Sparks's profile: her bio, education, and so on.

Sparks fills out the questionnaire:

> **Book Title:**
> *It Happened to Nancy*
> **Author's Name:**
> *Beatrice Sparks, PhD (Doctor B)*
> **Name as you would like it to appear in connection with press materials:**
> *Beatrice Sparks, PhD (Doctor B)*
> **If not a full-time writer, current occupation:**
> *Therapist, speaker, part time teacher at BYU*
> **Brief summary of education:**
> *Degrees from Southern California, Columbia, and BYU—BA, MA, PhD*

So now, the million-dollar question:

How would you, the editor, classify *It Happened to Nancy*?

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* Attention, older readers: Avon Books has no connection to Avon Incorporated, the pushy cosmetics firm.

Sad but True

Ellen Krieger wasn't just Sparks's editor, she was the director of Avon's entire young readers division. A graduate of Wellesley, Krieger had been at Doubleday, then HarperCollins, and was in her tenth year at Avon. She'd handled big authors and big sellers, and was sharp as chipped china.

Krieger was also—irony alert—a fiend for detective novels, and had cofounded a club for like-minded readers, serving as its president for a dozen-plus years.

So how did respected editor/mystery buff Ellen Krieger react to *Nancy*'s missing diary pages? Or the revelation that the "diary" was actually a pastiche of different sources? Or Sparks's sudden profusion of college degrees?

Authority and responsibility go hand in hand, and on Krieger's watch it all got approved for publication, including the blurbs from "Nancy's doctors," Sparks's giant credit ("EDITED BY BEATRICE SPARKS, PhD"), and the flat declaration inside:

> This is a work of nonfiction. It is based on the actual diary of a teenage girl who was infected with the AIDS virus as a result of date-rape.

• • •

Much had changed in the years since *Jay's Journal*, but teenage trauma still sold, and the illicit thrill of reading someone else's diary was timeless.

The American Library Association selected *Nancy* as a "Recommended Reading" pick, and Avon sold a quick ten thousand copies directly to school book fairs, followed by ten thousand more a few months later.

"Based on Nancy's diary and many hours of personal interviews with Nancy," wrote Jennifer Haines in Provo's always-reliable *Daily Herald*, "Beatrice Sparks recreates a touching, open, and true story. Every parent should read *It Happened to Nancy*. Parents who read *Nancy* will be able to better teach their children about teen-age sex, teen-age pregnancy, date-rape, and AIDS by using this book as an educational tool."

The ink had barely dried on *Nancy*'s reviews when Sparks pitched another teen tell-all to Avon Books, who snapped it up and scheduled it for a 1996 release.

Shameless

In the decade following *It Happened to Nancy*, Sparks published four more books in the *Alice/Jay* vein—things like *Treacherous Love*, the diary of an anonymous teen seduced by her teacher, and *Annie's Baby*, the diary of an anonymous teen mother.

The "fiction" and "nonfiction" labels varied with each new printing, but all had the same large credit: "edited by Beatrice Sparks, PhD."

• • •

Even by Sparks's standards, however, 1996's *Almost Lost: The True Story of an Anonymous Teenager's Life on the Streets* was audacious. It seemed less like a book than a high-wire taunt—the absolute proof that no one would stop her.

The story of "Sammy," a rebellious fifteen-year-old from a malfunctioning family, *Almost Lost* wasn't a teenage diary. Instead, it was a case file from Sparks's "psychology practice," complete with transcripts, clinical notes, appointment schedules, and worksheets. By now, Beatrice Sparks wasn't just a character in her own books, she was a therapeutic superhero, rescuing children and families alike.

> MONDAY, APRIL 4, 2:00 PM
> EDITED TAPE FROM FIRST VISIT
> SAMUEL (SAMMY) GORDON, 15 YEARS OLD

> "Hi, Samuel. I'm Doctor B."
>
> "Hi."
>
> Samuel sounded as depleted as if he had just done his best, but still finished dead last, in an exhausting marathon that he had really wanted to win.
>
> "Do you like to be called Samuel, Sam, Sammy, or something else?"
>
> He shrugged.
>
> "I want you to know that anything you say in this session is completely between the two of us. I am required by law to keep it confidential. I am even more bound by my own code of ethics to honor and respect your thoughts and concepts and words absolutely."
>
> Samuel continues. "What I really want is for you and the rest of the whole screwed-up world, including me, to just quickly and quietly dissolve into nothing, never-was, nothingness."
>
> "You don't know me but—"
>
> "I kind of know you through your books."
>
> "I hope you know how much I cared for each of those kids."

Over the next 239 pages, "Doctor B" cures Sammy's depression and steers him toward a sunny, rewarding life. Along the way, she also straightens out Sammy's parents, saving their marriage and keeping Sammy's father, Lance, away from cocaine.

The book's inside description was the most brazen of Sparks's career:

> *Almost Lost* is a work of nonfiction based on the actual counseling sessions between Dr. Sparks and a suicidal teenager.

To the question "how many diaries can one woman find?" Sparks now had a ready answer: they were actually *case studies*, all drawn from her

clinical practice with teenage patients.

There were no case studies. There were no patients. There was no clinical practice. Beatrice Sparks was no more a psychologist than she was a Sasquatch, and even a lazy editor could have unraveled the lies with a single phone call.*

• • •

Like *Go Ask Alice* and *It Happened to Nancy*, *Almost Lost* came endorsed by a medical professional: "Dr. Phillip Morgenstern." As with the doctors who praised Sparks's other books ("Dr. Milton Norbaum" for *Nancy*, "Dr. Myron Greenbaum" for *Alice*, etc.), Phillip Morgenstern shared Sparks's distinct writing style, and even ended his forward for *Almost Lost* with an Alice-esque "love ya."

These doctors have something else in common: none of them seems to have actually existed.

Ancestry.com, which currently indexes more than one hundred million family trees and more than thirty billion historical records, has no trace of a "Milton Norbaum." Even dropping the "Milton" only gets you fourteen results—and several of those are typos.

"Dr. Myron Greenbaum" and "Dr. Phillip Morgenstern" fare scarcely better. Of the few Myron Greenbaums listed by Ancestry, one vanished after the 1930 census, one is a young lawyer in Illinois, and one is an electrical engineer in New Jersey. As for "Dr. Phillip Morgenstern," the closest candidate is a gastroenterologist who emigrated from Poland in 1920 and focused on the study of mustard gas.*

Considering that Sparks was the go-between for these endorsements, the conclusion is hard to avoid: the doctors were, like so much else in Sparks's life, a flimsy, obvious hoax.

And what was her punishment for all of this?

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* The state of Utah, for one, could have confirmed that Sparks had no license, much less an actual psychology practice. The state might have added that posing as a psychologist, even on paper, was a

jailable offense.

* Also (and there is no other way to put this), names like “Milton Norbaum, MD” manage to ring both false *and* clichéd—the creation of someone for whom Jews are a theoretical concept.

Scene and Herd

Wednesday, November 6, 1996

The Waldorf Astoria's Grand Ballroom was a sea of little round tables, each one draped in black and topped with a spray of crimson flowers. High overhead, a massive chandelier—sixteen feet of shimmering Waterford crystal—glowed a soft, golden yellow.

The National Book Awards always drew a powerful crowd, and this was no exception. More than six hundred publishing luminaries had gathered for the industry's version of the Oscars; a well-placed meteor strike would have crippled the business for at least nine months.

And there, at table thirty-seven, seated among the book world's brightest names, was a woman born near the train tracks of an Idaho mining camp.

For Beatrice Sparks, it was the apex of a lifelong transformation. Yes, there had been other shining moments: a year earlier, Beatrice and LaVorn had attended a private Sundance Film Festival party where they'd mingled with politicians, tech luminaries, and even Robert Redford. But for a writer, especially one who craved importance, the National Book Awards were hard to match. And Beatrice Sparks wasn't just *at* the National Book Awards, or there as a nominee. She was attending as a judge.

• • •

The invitation had come in April, just as *Almost Lost*, her case history of "Sammy," was headed to bookstores. The National Book Foundation was adding an award for Young People's Literature, and since Sparks had helped establish the young adult genre, why not put her on the panel?

Sparks had accepted, then spread the news far and wide, even to people who probably didn't care. On the registration card for a *different* convention, she scrawled, "Sorry I cannot join you—I have been invited to be a judge for the National Book Awards!" (Despite having no plans to attend this other convention, she filled out the entire form, describing herself as a "PhD, Adolescent Psychotherapist, and Writer.")

• • •

Checking in to the Waldorf Astoria, Sparks entered a kind of pantheon. Winston Churchill had stayed at the Waldorf, as had Albert Einstein, the Dalai Lama, and every US president since Herbert Hoover. In 1939, Cole Porter had simply purchased a five-bedroom suite, and lived there until his death in 1964, after which, Frank Sinatra moved in.

Even the floors were priceless. The Park Avenue lobby was tiled with a stunning 148,000-piece mural by French artist Louis Rigal, one of fourteen Rigals in the foyer alone.

The rooms themselves were breathtaking, of course, and each had its own design. That was part of the allure: you could stay at the Waldorf a hundred times and never see the same thing twice. The only constant was marble, which gave pleasing solidity to the Art Deco sheen. White marble with dove-gray feathering. Black Belgian marble with powder-pink highlights. Italian marble the color of jade. And every suite had a large marble bathtub, polished and shaped to a cream-smooth finish.

By normal standards, the rooms were spacious; by Manhattan standards, they were cathedrals, with the biggest approaching twenty-three hundred

square feet. A few had private elevators, their brushed-nickel doors like satin to the touch.

When you arrived at the Waldorf Astoria, you had *arrived*.

• • •

A few hours before the ceremony, Sparks and the other judges met at a nearby restaurant. Over the previous months, they'd narrowed the field to five finalists, and now, after some back-and-forth, they settled on *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida*, a coming-of-age novel by Victor Martinez.

The winner selected, Sparks returned to her suite, then made her way to the Waldorf's Grand Ballroom, a space with its own rich history: galas for Queen Elizabeth II and French president Charles de Gaulle, New Year's Eve concerts by Guy Lombardo, and the annual International Debutante Ball, where lacquered girls from upper-crust families were displayed like Tiffany lamps.

So many gatekeepers, so many gates. No one had ever called Beatrice Sparks a debutante, or an upper-crust *anything*. Not as a teenager, anyway. And yet, here she was.

• • •

Sparks's moment came early, when, just before announcing the Young People's Literature award, Joyce Carol Thomas thanked her fellow judges.

"And to Lloyd Alexander, Leonard Marcus, Gary Soto, and Beatrice Sparks," said Thomas, "my gratitude for their months of reading, days of debate, and hours of trying to distinguish among the many wonderful, enchanting, simply beautiful children's books we received from the publishers."

Thomas spoke in a halting, buzzy drone; Sparks would have blown her off the stage. Still, it was real. It was official. Beatrice Sparks was *somebody*.

A few moments later, Thomas announced the winner. “Tonight, I present the 1996 National Book Award for Young People’s Literature to Victor Martinez, for *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida*.”

Martinez, a thick-built former truck driver with glasses and facial scarring, made his way to the stage, where Thomas handed him a small crystal statue. Martinez also got a check for ten thousand dollars, more than his total income the previous year.

Childhood exposure to pesticides had ravaged Martinez’s vocal cords, and for two years during adolescence, he’d lost his voice entirely. Now forty-two, he was visibly nervous when speaking in public, and his words came out like sandpaper.

Martinez thanked his editor, his wife, and a few influential teachers, then left to a crest of cheers.

Out in the audience, Sparks clapped along.

Of course, if *she’d* been up there, it would have been different. Beatrice Sparks could light up a room, her voice loud and strong, filling the place from floor to ceiling. When Beatrice spoke, people felt it.

• • •

The other categories drifted by, a collective prelude to the headline event.

As finales go, Toni Morrison was the perfect choice. Oprah’s film version of *Beloved* was still two years off, but in the right circles, Morrison was already enshrined—an author favored with slow, thoughtful nods. *So regal. So articulate.*

Morrison took the stage, and everyone stood, twelve hundred hands raining hosannas.

As the applause continued, author Walter Mosley presented Morrison with one of writing’s highest honors, the award for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. It came with ten thousand dollars, a large bronze medal, and incalculable validation.

At her table, so far from the stage, Beatrice Sparks watched it all.

Toni Morrison was a publishing insider who’d spent fifteen years at Random House, so of *course* she had connections, and people tripped over

themselves to give her awards: a Pulitzer, a Barnard Medal of Distinction, a *Nobel Prize*, for Pete's sake.

"I want to tell two little stories," Morrison said as the applause finally trailed off. "The first, I heard third- or fourth-hand . . ."

And Morrison's books were full of mayhem: incest, underage rape, a woman slashing her own baby's throat. But critics fawned over her, and this room was no different. Everyone church-quiet, just soaking up the *wisdom*.

Complaining would have been easy. How many of the evening's winners would even be remembered a year later? *Go Ask Alice* was a quarter-century old and still moving a thousand copies a week; more than four million so far. With *Alice* alone, Sparks had sold more books than most of the room combined. But no one asked her to speak, or even to stand up when they introduced the judges.

That's how it had always been. Ignored. Pushed aside. After all the money she'd made for the publishers, *Alice* still didn't have her *name* on it.

No matter. She'd arrived at the innermost, and that's what counted.

Fifteen minutes later, Morrison wrapped up, and everyone moved to the Waldorf's Louis XVI Suite for a champagne reception. As a Mormon, Sparks didn't drink, but parties weren't off-limits, and Saints lived to network.

Besides, lying is easier when everyone else partakes.*

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* The National Book Foundation did not respond to my numerous requests for comment.

Bad at Being Human

In a granite-shielded, climate-controlled vault deep below Brigham Young University are nine large boxes, each with the same label heading:

> Title
> Beatrice Sparks Papers, 1949–2000
>
> Creator
> Sparks, Beatrice
>
> Biographical History Abstract
> Author with PhD in human behavior. Specialist in child and adolescent psychology. Member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon).

Each box is packed with manila folders, and each folder bulges with unsorted bric-a-brac: pamphlets, brochures, news clippings, holiday cards, personal letters, and scribbled notes about future projects. It's as though Sparks couldn't stand to part with anything bearing her name, a trait that quickly turns from "interesting" to "ghastly."

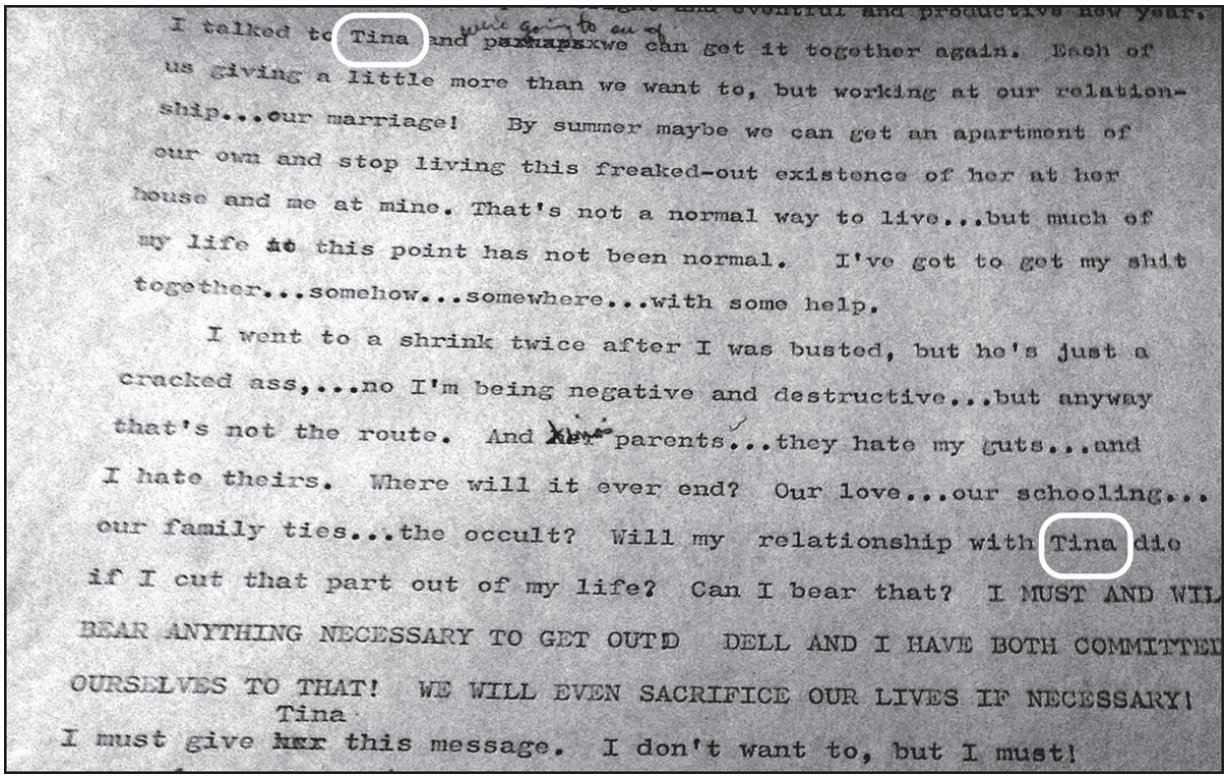
• • •

Let’s dispatch with the basics. Beatrice Sparks was, in every sense, a terrible liar. Her deceptions weren’t just frequent and hurtful; they were klutzy, bordering on incompetent.

For one thing, Sparks saved numerous *drafts* of her fraud. Large sections of Alden Barrett’s journal were photocopied, altered by hand, then copied again. Others were spackled with correction fluid, allowing Sparks to shuffle the order or insert new text between sections. Elsewhere, a letter from Alden’s friend Kurt has been copied, and a new sentence added: “There’s only one way out now—through the grave.” (Across the side of this copy are the words “Do Not Use.”)

One page, buried halfway through a stack of unrelated papers, reveals the whole lazy scam.

It’s a note supposedly typewritten by Alden and “redacted” by Sparks for the sake of privacy. Throughout the letter, the name “Teresa” is whited-out and changed to “Tina.” But there’s a problem: at two different points, “Tina” is typed *directly on the page*. (In other words, rather than “Teresa” whited-out and replaced with “Tina,” it’s just “Tina” from the outset.)



I talked to Tina and perhaps we can get it together again. Each of us giving a little more than we want to, but working at our relationship...our marriage! By summer maybe we can get an apartment of our own and stop living this freaked-out existence of her at her house and me at mine. That's not a normal way to live...but much of my life at this point has not been normal. I've got to get my shit together...somehow...somewhere...with some help.

I went to a shrink twice after I was busted, but he's just a cracked ass,...no I'm being negative and destructive...but anyway that's not the route. And her parents...they hate my guts...and I hate theirs. Where will it ever end? Our love...our schooling... our family ties...the occult? Will my relationship with Tina die if I cut that part out of my life? Can I bear that? I MUST AND WIL BEAR ANYTHING NECESSARY TO GET OUT D DELL AND I HAVE BOTH COMMITTED OURSELVES TO THAT! WE WILL EVEN SACRIFICE OUR LIVES IF NECESSARY!

I must give her this message. I don't want to, but I must!

(Courtesy of the L. Tom Perry Special Collections Department, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.)

Since Alden (a) didn't type his journal, and (b) wouldn't have called Teresa "Tina," it doesn't take Veronica Mars to figure out the rest.

It's a clumsy, telling mistake. Sparks couldn't even be bothered to *forge* correctly, much less dispose of the evidence afterward. She assumed (rightly, as it turned out) that people would accept whatever she told them.

There are dozens of these slipups, and they soon become a dispiriting wash. That changes with Box Number Two.

There, amid the scraps of commerce and myth, is a stash of news clippings about the fallout in Pleasant Grove.

As the Barretts found themselves besieged, slowly coming apart in a cauldron of public shame, Sparks observed it all with an artist's care, clipping and filing the snapshots of another family's destruction.

This is something more than *wrong*. It outstrips squishy labels like "troubling" and "problematic." Even "sinister" feels inadequate.

That Beatrice Sparks, whose own family imploded after her parents' divorce, and whose *own first child* died in infancy, betrayed the Barretts is vile enough. That she tracked their suffering—and actually kept *souvenirs*—is ugly beyond measure, and carries the unmistakable stench of a crawlspace.

It also leads to a strange reappraisal.

I’m Looking Through You

While the outer details shifted, Sparks’s core explanation for *Go Ask Alice* was nearly always the same. Here’s the five-sentence version:

> In the summer of 1970, Sparks was teaching daytime classes at a youth convention on the BYU campus. Late one evening, a teen attending from California (“Alice”) had a sudden, hysterical breakdown. After trying and failing to calm the young woman, a counselor finally phoned Beatrice Sparks, who arrived at the dorm and soon had Alice under control.
>
> As the week progressed, Sparks learned more about Alice’s troubles—stories of drug use and sexual indiscretions.
>
> When the youth convention ended, Alice returned to California, and Sparks stayed in touch with the girl and her family.

From there, things quickly went sideways,[*] but the central facts were consistent, especially for Sparks, who excelled at forgetting her own stories.

What’s notable is what’s *missing*. When discussing “the real Alice,” Sparks rarely called her a runaway or a former drug dealer. She skipped the acid-laced soda, and the long stretches spent on the street. Instead, she hit the same few points: the youth convention, the California teen, the late-night breakdown, the call from a counselor.

It’s miles from *Go Ask Alice*, but Alden Barrett is miles from *Jay’s Journal*. (Without the personal details, would anyone have read *Jay*’s cow-

killing escapades and thought, *Wow, that must be Alden*?)

For more than fifty years, people have asked the same question: *Did the girl from the diary exist?*

But there's a question that seemingly no one asked.

Did the girl from the *story* exist?

---

* Sometimes Alice died thirteen days later; sometimes it was six weeks, sometimes several months. Sometimes Sparks got the diaries from Alice, sometimes from Alice's parents. Sometimes there were audiotapes, sometimes not.

An Interlude

There's no way around this, so let's deal with it now. What follows is altered for privacy.

I know how that sounds, especially after three hundred pages explaining why truth is fiction, war is peace, there is no spoon, etc.

If you choose to doubt, I won't blame you. That said, if you've made it this far, perhaps I've accrued a little trust.

In the next two chapters, I'll tell what I know, and do my best to protect the innocent. That this story exists at all is on Beatrice Sparks. Not causing further harm is on me.

Flashback

Saturday, July 11, 1970

The campus of Brigham Young University is dry, in every sense. Elevation and weeks of summer have parched the air, and it chaps your skin, wicking away every drop of sweat, and turning your voice to a rasp. The breeze smells like a dusty attic.

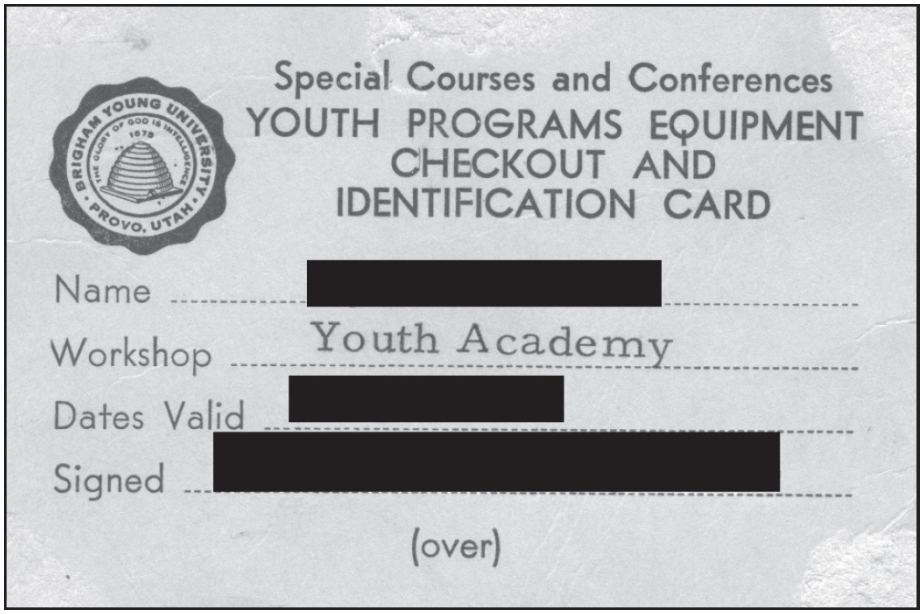
Everywhere you look, there is *order*. The campus buildings are wide and squarish. Not actually ugly, but beige and imposing. The lawns are golf-perfect, and they stay that way, because nobody touches them. Instead, everyone uses the concrete paths. “Cougars,” the saying goes, referencing BYU’s mascot, “don’t cut corners.”

To the east, the Wasatch Mountains fill your vision. Two miles high and spanning half the state, the slabs of rock and earth seem close enough to touch, but impossible to cross. The sense of isolation is absolute. At BYU, it’s easy to feel that no place else exists.

Late in the morning, young women arrive, emerging from cars or stepping off buses. Nearly all are white, with straight, sleek hair that hits the shoulders. They carry suitcases and vanity bags, and most wear dresses or long skirts; a few are in pants, but that won’t last. The girls are chatting and smiling, seeing old friends and making new ones.

This is Youth Academy, a summer camp for Mormon teenagers. For the next seven days, the young Saints will have a microversion of college life:

attending classes, eating in the commons, and living in a dorm room with an assigned roommate.


Special Courses and Conferences
YOUTH PROGRAMS EQUIPMENT
CHECKOUT AND
IDENTIFICATION CARD

Name [redacted]
Workshop Youth Academy
Dates Valid [redacted]
Signed [redacted]
(over)

As the young women mingle, we zoom in on a fourteen-year-old with dark bobbed hair, a sunburn, and an impressive scrape on one elbow.

A tomboy from Washington State, Tobi Hudson didn't always *look* like a proper young Mormon (female version), but that was deceiving. She was a true believer who'd spent the spring picking apples for five cents a pound, then paid the $125 tuition herself. It was her first visit to BYU, and she was nearly aloft with excitement.

Suitcase in hand, Tobi made her way to Deseret Towers, the seven-story dorm where she'd live for the next week. Navigating the blue-carpeted hallways, she eventually found 308, a double room with white cinderblock walls and a view of the mountains.

As she unpacked, someone appeared in the doorway. Tobi looked over . . . then looked up.

• • •

At fourteen, Brenda March was taller than most *boys* her age, and she positively loomed over Tobi. A pasty Californian with long blond hair and eyes of pale amber, Brenda wasn't just tall, she was powerfully built, and the flowery dress didn't hide it. She had broad shoulders and muscular arms, with strong-looking hands, and nails that were chewed to the quick.

Underpinning all of this was a kind of intangible bluntness. It was in the way she talked, and the way she sat, and it was *always* there.

Decades later, Sarah Faber, a volunteer counselor in 1970, drifts into memory, searching for the right description.

"Brenda was . . . having a real identity crisis," says Faber. "She was so *masculine*. She didn't—absolutely *did not*—want to be a girl, and so she had trouble fitting in. All the girls had to wear dresses, and Brenda was very large-framed, and just so . . . *masculine*. She talked like a boy."

• • •

Still, rules were rules. Girls were expected to dress and behave *like girls*, and if they didn't know what that meant, there were men on hand to explain it.

Stepping onto BYU's campus, even for a visit, meant accepting the school's Honor Code, a set of dictates with the force of law.

At BYU, there was no alcohol, no tobacco, no tea or coffee, no gambling, no "erotic material," and no illicit drugs. For students, an arrest for drug possession (even if the student was later found innocent) meant automatic forfeiture of that semester's credits.

Men had to be short-haired, clean-shaven, and dressed respectably. Bare feet were forbidden, as were sweatshirts and above-the-knee shorts.

Women could wear makeup, but nothing too garish. Hair had to be a "natural" color. More than one piercing per ear was forbidden. (This being 1970, other piercings were a nonissue.)

Women couldn't wear pants. If they tried, they'd be sent back to their rooms to find something feminine. But not *too* feminine: skirts and dresses had to cover the knees, and couldn't be strapless, spaghetti strapped, or

form fitting. Show up in anything like that, and it was back to your room—again.

During the school year, a team of “skirt police” handed immodest women a pamphlet titled *Pardon Me.*

• • •

On the surface, Youth Academy was like any summer camp. Kids got a break from their parents (and vice versa), and spent a week feeling slightly older. There were courses to take and things to learn, from music and painting to college prep.

There were *other* courses, too, with names like “Sports Adventure for Boys” and “Survival Adventure for Boys.”

There was no “Sports Adventure for Girls.” No “Sports Adventure for *Everyone*.”

In theory, young women could sign up for whatever they liked. In practice, they were shunted into man catching via two courses: “Personal Development for Girls” and “Thinderella” (subtitled “personal development for overweight girls”). Both courses taught etiquette, homemaking, and the all-encompassing “personal appearance,” but Thinderella put extra emphasis on diet and exercise . . . and not asking why overweight *boys* didn’t have a special class.

It was the absolute center of a pressurized, thought-shaping system. Here, in the most conservative region of the nation’s most conservative state, on the campus of a Church-run college, in classrooms divided by sex (in roles determined by God, via men), young Mormon women learned their life’s purpose: to marry, to have as many children as possible, and to serve their husbands, their male Church leaders, and their Heavenly Father.

• • •

As bedtime approached that first evening, Tobi saw Brenda fully dressed and lying on the bed, her eyes clenched against streaming tears.

Tobi knelt down. “Brenda, what’s wrong?”

Brenda looked over at Tobi.

“God doesn’t want me.”

“What?” asked Tobi. “What do you mean?”

For a moment, Brenda didn’t answer. Her eyes were red and swollen; her face gone blotchy. When she finally spoke, her voice was strangled.

“God hates me.”

It was such an ugly, alien statement that Tobi just backed away, like retreating from a strange new insect.

Out in the hallway, Tobi saw counselor Sarah Faber and blurted out, “Brenda needs help.”

It was Sarah’s second summer as a Youth Academy counselor, and she wasn’t going to rattle. She went to the room and saw Brenda curled up, staring off into nothing.

Maybe it’s just homesickness, thought Sarah, walking toward Brenda. *She’s been traveling, and there’s no family here. She’ll be all right.*

As Sarah approached, Brenda let out a loud, unbroken wail. It wasn’t a scream, because it didn’t trail off or waver, just held an ear-splitting pitch until Brenda ran out of breath, then started up again. *Like a siren,* thought Sarah.

Tobi watched from the hallway, wanting to help, wanting to run.

Sarah was caught in the moment, unsure what to do. She’d never dealt with something like this.

What if I make it worse? What happens then?

Fortunately, there was someone on call. A green-eyed psychologist named Beatrice Sparks.

• • •

When living in Los Angeles, Sparks had volunteered at a veterans hospital, and after moving to Provo in 1964, she’d done the same at the Utah State Hospital, which had a separate psych unit for adolescents—the Youth Center.*

According to the hospital's Volunteer Service Department, volunteer duties included "mending and sorting clothing, providing evening entertainment, and assisting teens with homework." Admirable service, and necessary. But in Sparks's telling, such nonclinical work became "professional counseling of troubled children." In speeches and columns, meanwhile, she frequently mentioned "psychology training" and having "majored in psychology," usually at UCLA.

UCLA. Majored in psychology. Worked at the state hospital. Professionally counseled troubled children. For many people, those dots connected themselves, and by 1969, at least one local newspaper had called Sparks "a psychologist at the Provo Mental Hospital."

Now, as Brenda March wailed in that high, unsettling register, Sarah Faber and Tobi Hudson fought to stay composed, and waited for "Dr. Sparks" to arrive.

• • •

Sparks knew how to control a situation. The key was acting like you already ran things; do that, and everyone followed.

Sparks sent the other girls back to their dorm rooms. Tobi didn't know where to go, so she followed Sarah, and they waited in silence, braced for another explosion.

After a long while, Sparks came to Sarah's room, and said that things would be okay. Brenda, Sparks explained, had some "unhealthy tendencies," and back home in California, her parents had already put her in therapy. It was important, Sparks said, to treat Brenda "like one of the girls."

• • •

The next six days were a mixture of fear and exhaustion. Brenda's meltdown didn't recur, but she was disruptive and strange, piping up with questions that made no sense, and walking out of classrooms mid-lesson.

When she wasn't vanishing or derailing conversations, Brenda told abrupt and shocking stories—about marijuana, and heroin, and suicide attempts. About her sex life, and a boyfriend named Steven. All in the same deadpan delivery.

In the cloistered space of Youth Academy, the stories circulated, and people believed what they wanted.

One day, Tobi saw Brenda standing in a stairwell, talking to . . . nobody. After a few moments, Brenda turned to Tobi and waved her over. As Tobi approached, Brenda said she wanted to introduce her boyfriend.

"This," said Brenda, pointing to a fire extinguisher, "is Steven."

The scandalous tales and odd behavior, Tobi later concluded, were a kind of emotional venting: one part performance, one part aggression, one part personal anguish.

• • •

Despite the tumult, Tobi and Brenda made a connection. They were different cuts of the same cloth, these intense and brilliant girls. Tobi Hudson was a good-hearted zealot who wanted to save the world (possibly by force). Brenda March prayed with equal fervor, but also with desperation; there was fear in her entreaties, and a clutching, desolate hope.

When Youth Academy ended, Tobi and Brenda vowed to stay in touch. They lived on opposite ends of the West Coast (Tobi up north in Yakima, Brenda down south in Ukiah), but swapped addresses and promised to write.

With tears and hugs, they said goodbye, and went their separate ways.

It's a common refrain—*I'll stay in touch, I swear*—but Tobi meant it. From her first week back in Washington State, she wrote to Brenda, sending long, thought-out letters of prayer and support.

Brenda's responses were sad and confusing, and more than a little scary:

> I miss you more than I can even say. I wish you could come see me.
>
> I don't know what is wrong with me, but I ruin everyone and everything. Maybe that's why God hates me.

> There is nothing anybody can do. God doesn't care. I would be better off dead at the bottom of a river. I should kill myself and get it over with.

Then, a few days later:

> Isn't life perfect? I'm so glad we met. Heavenly Father is watching over me, and He will not let me falter. The future is beautiful and bright, and I am blessed!

The emotional whipsawing broke Tobi's heart, and she prayed and fasted, sending every good thought toward her suffering friend. *If I only pray hard enough*, she thought, *Heavenly Father will keep Brenda safe.*

Please, God. Please make Brenda well.

The letters kept coming.

> God has shut me out. Why? I ask for His help, and feel only coldness. Why doesn't He love me? I don't think I can go on like this anymore. I'm so sad and scared.

Tobi gave sympathy, advice—whatever she thought might help, but nothing seemed to change.

She didn't know what to do.

But she knew someone who might.

---

* Alice's July 22 entry reads, "Dad and Mom keep calling the place where I'm going a youth center, but they aren't fooling anybody . . . they are sending me to an insane asylum!"

Follow You Down

Thursday, September 10, 1970

After Youth Academy, Beatrice Sparks was at loose ends. Three years earlier, she'd ghostwritten for the Family Achievement Institute, and pitched several ideas to Art Linkletter, but nothing had stuck.

Now, Linkletter had changed. His daughter had jumped out a window, apparently after taking LSD, and Linkletter was crazy with anger, condemning the drug as unalloyed evil.

He wasn't alone in that view. In Los Angeles, the Manson trial had barely started, and lawyers for both sides had already mentioned LSD. Charles Manson, they said, had used it to rewire good Christian girls, turning them into blood-hungry monsters.

In Marina del Rey, cops had arrested a frizzy-haired activist for bringing acid-laced snacks to a "swinging singles" party. Seventeen people—or possibly fifty, depending on the source—had wound up in the hospital. Two, said newspapers, had even slipped into comas.

And on Capitol Hill, Congress was about to pass Nixon's new drug law, making LSD a Schedule I substance, no different than heroin.

It was all in the ether, waiting to form.

• • •

Going through her morning mail, Sparks saw a letter from Tobi Hudson.

> I am so frightened for Brenda, Sister Sparks. I fast and pray, and I try to help her see the good parts of life, but I don't know if it's even helping. I am so afraid of what she might do. She thinks God has abandoned her. Please, please help her.

Sparks rushed a reply, and a three-sided circuit commenced: Brenda sharing her pain with Tobi, Tobi consoling and praying for Brenda, and Sparks getting the updates. Sparks also contacted Brenda's parents and bishop.

As the weeks passed, Tobi's moods began to mirror Brenda's, shifting from joy to despair without warning. Tobi's parents grew increasingly worried. What if Brenda did something rash? How would Tobi react?

When they heard that Brenda was mentioning suicide, they finally stepped in, putting an end to the friendship. *You can't talk with Brenda anymore. No letters, no phone calls, nothing. We know you tried to help her, but now you have to stop.*

Tobi's bishop agreed. This was between Brenda, her parents, and Heavenly Father. It was best—for everyone—if Tobi moved on.

Then they made her burn Brenda's letters.

• • •

Several weeks later, Tobi, who was still only fourteen, reflected in a letter to Beatrice Sparks:

> Looking back, I wish I had done more. If I could only do things over, I would treat Brenda as a person, and *only* as a person. Not as a "problem" or some kind of outcast, but a person who needed my help.
>
> I tried to play psychologist, and it got the better of me, but it also hurt Brenda, and for that, I am so filled with remorse.
>
> If there is ever a next time, I must *and will* do better.

> I do hope that you and I can remain in contact (if you are not too busy, that is).
>
> May the Lord bless and keep you.
>
> Love,
> Tobi

Sparks never replied. Perhaps that's because she *was* very busy. By the time of Tobi's final letter, Sparks had sold an exciting new project. It was the story of a troubled girl from California who got into drugs—even heroin—eventually suffering a terrible breakdown. And, said Sparks, it was all entirely true. In fact, she'd met the girl just a few months earlier . . . at a BYU summer camp.

A Girl Like You

Time passed. Presidents came and went. Fashions emerged, flourished, then faded away.

But certain things remained.

1976

In Fayetteville, New York, Laurie Halse Anderson, fourteen, found a copy of *Go Ask Alice* and felt transported. Here was someone with a life as ugly as her own, maybe more so.

The year before, just prior to starting ninth grade, Anderson had been raped by an older boy, and the experience turned her spectral and silent. When the rapist died in an accident just one month later, Anderson thought her own sorrow had ended.

She was wrong. “I did not know,” she later wrote, “that the haunting had just begun.”

Anderson’s father suffered from war-induced trauma and drank heavily, and her mother labored to keep things afloat. Afraid that speaking up might add to the burden, Anderson kept quiet about the rape.

She vanished in plain sight, shielded by drugs and the printed page.

“When I wasn’t stoned,” wrote Anderson decades later, “the only thing that helped me breathe was opening a book.”

One day, she discovered *Go Ask Alice*. “Not only was it a gripping read,” Anderson recalled, “it also convinced me that there was somebody out there whose life sucked worse than mine.”

It took another twenty years for Anderson to tell someone—a therapist—about the rape. In the meantime, she’d written several books of her own. The breakthrough came in 1999, when she published *Speak*, a novel whose teenage protagonist, Melinda, is raped at a party. *Speak* was a bestseller, a finalist for a National Book Award, and a target for censors, who fought to remove it from schools.

A film version followed, and later, a graphic novel.

Speaking to *Booklist* in 2004, Anderson gave thanks to the unnamed diarist who’d helped her survive—and find her own voice.

“I owe it all to Anonymous,” she said. “Sometimes you take hope where you can find it.”

1996

In southwest Pittsburgh, teenager Gillian Jacobs found a copy of *Go Ask Alice* and figured she’d give it a chance. Just a few pages in, she was transfixed.

An actress since the age of eight, Jacobs had already met her share of drunks and druggies, and knew that if she wasn’t careful, she could go the same route. Her father had been fighting addiction for years, a constant reminder of its parasite grip.

After reading *Alice*’s final few pages, Jacobs vowed to avoid drugs and booze forever.

Twenty years later, after roles on *Girls*, *Law and Order*, *Love*, and a six-season run on *Community*, she was still clean and sober.

“*Go Ask Alice*,” said Jacobs, “inoculated me.”

2010

In Arapahoe, Nebraska, twelve-year-old Morgan Curran was afraid and confused. Her older sister, Sam, had turned into someone else—a stranger you couldn't trust or talk to.

It was meth. Sam had started getting high in her teens, taking whatever was offered, but meth had hollowed her out, leaving her glassy and vacant. She stole from the family and lied to their faces. Every now and then she cleaned up, but the drug always lured her back.

Morgan wanted to understand, but more than that, she wanted to reach inside and grab the real Sam; to pull her out before she dissolved forever.

At school, someone told Morgan about *Go Ask Alice* and said she ought to read it.

When she got to the epilogue, it felt like a punch in the stomach. The girl was dead. Dead and cold and never returning. Tears streamed down Morgan's face, and she found herself trying to *will* the future. *Sam won't die. Sam won't die. Sam won't die.*

But at the same moment, she understood two things: *I can't fix Sam . . . and I will never use drugs.*

Later, Morgan read about Beatrice Sparks and about *Go Ask Alice*; how people said it was all made up. That didn't wash with her. Embellished or not, there was truth at the core, and anyone who'd been there could see it.

• • •

Sparks herself understood *Alice*'s legacy, and she guarded it like an angry parent. In 1998, she learned of a website called GoAskAlice.com. The site, run by Columbia University, was an advice column for teens and twenty-somethings, and gave blunt, graphic answers to sex and health questions. ("Alice" was the collective name for the site's editors.)

Sparks was appalled by the content, particularly its judgment-free discussions of group sex, anal intercourse, and other *outré* activities. When Sparks discovered a spin-off paperback called *The Go Ask Alice Book of Answers: A Guide to Physical, Sexual, and Emotional Health*, she was apoplectic, and sent a series of outraged letters to Columbia University president George Rupp. Written on "Beatrice Mathews Sparks, PhD"

letterhead, the opening salvo was a perfect distillation of Sparks's public persona:

> In 1971, my book titled *Go Ask Alice* was published. It started the genre of Young Adult Books and was a "best seller." It is still selling well. I am an Adolescent Psychologist and all my books come from true diaries or case histories of teenagers.*
>
> I also hold a Doctorate of Philosophy in Human Behavior. My books have won Christopher Medals and been named as School Library Journal Best Books. I was a 1996 National Book Awards Judge and lecture around the nation.
>
> While on a speaking, book-signing, and award-receiving tour, *The Go Ask Alice Guide to Physical, Sexual, and Emotional Health* was shown to me by a librarian. She presumed I had written the book.
>
> COLUMBIA'S *GO ASK ALICE* IS MALIGNING MY REPUTATION AND CREDIBILITY!

That any of this even mattered spoke to *Alice*'s unflagging popularity. Decades after shocking America, *Go Ask Alice* had sold nearly four million copies and become a rite of passage—a grubby, strip-mall cousin to *The Bell Jar*. (And a more successful one at that: by 1998, *Alice* was outselling Sylvia Plath's iconic novel by more than two-to-one.)

But the numbers were only part of it. *Go Ask Alice* was embedded in the culture, and even people who'd never read it knew the broad strokes. *Some junkie's diary . . . it might be fake . . . I think she dies at the end.*

That was *Alice* in a tiny, tiny box, but the real sweep was bigger. *Alice* was a social Rorschach, reflecting whatever you already believed—about drugs, about kids, about adults, about life. If you were young and fucked up, *Alice* rang true. If you were aging and fearful, *Alice* rang vile. To censors, it was filthy. To cynics, it was funny.

As the internet ascended, *Go Ask Alice*, like everything else in America, became a siloed property with opposing, intractable camps, each calling the other naive. A quick scan of Amazon's reader reviews from 2016 gave a sense of the rift:

> A must read for parents and impressionable boys and girls alike. I first read *Alice* when I was in middle school many years ago. When I re-read it as an adult (and a mother of two girls), I came away with a different perspective on the mindset of adolescents and the pressures they are under. Timeless life lessons.
>
> —Leo 69
>
> Tedious. Preachy. Obviously fiction. This may have worked to scare kids into not using drugs in the 1970s; I hope no one is relying on it to do that today. Basically, it's a quaint, naive relic from the beginning of the "war on drugs."
>
> —CJFCL
>
> If you have children or work with children, please read *Go Ask Alice* and *Jay's Journal* . . . they just may save your life or the life of your child. Read them with your children, with your students, and within your communities.
>
> Both journals are extremely honest and nakedly candid, poignant and tragic. Neither were released for the sake of profit, but rather by two sets of parents hoping they would prevent other children and teenagers from the same fate.
>
> —JMV
>
> Stupid, melodramatic crap. *Go Ask Alice* is severely overhyped and is written like a bad after-school special.
>
> —BewareOfOranges

The all-or-nothing view extended into classrooms, especially where drugs were concerned. In Alaska, Colorado, Illinois, New Mexico, and elsewhere, schools used *Alice* in the fight to keep students sober. At the University of Washington, *Go Ask Alice* was one of the college's "Young Adult Resources on the Science of Addiction."

Alice even reached people who couldn't—or generally *didn't*—read. Literacy programs ranked *Alice* among their most popular titles, ideal for reaching dyslexics and other "low-interest" readers.*

At the same time, social activists continued their anti-*Alice* crusade. In Michigan, New Jersey, Ohio, Texas, and New York, censors got *Alice* yanked from classrooms and school libraries, and for every successful banning, there were a dozen more attempts.

One such battle, *Island Trees School District v. Pico*, went all the way to the US Supreme Court, where a split decision returned *Alice* and eight other books (including *Soul on Ice* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*) to Long Island school libraries.

This tug-of-war put *Alice* in rarified company. When the American Library Association unveiled its "most-banned/challenged books" list in 1990, *Go Ask Alice* sat between Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl* and Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*. A decade later, *Alice* remained on the list, an enduring middle finger to priggish complainers.

• • •

All of it testified to the book's true power. *Alice* connected with readers—young women especially—in ways that sometimes defied expectation.

"A lot of people think *Go Ask Alice* is only about drugs," wrote Gabrielle Moss in *Lost* magazine, "but it wasn't the drugs or the crime or the counterculture that intrigued me. It was the way that the narrator was a mess . . . an exciting, bubbly, rebellious teenage basket case like I had never seen before.

"I didn't get that we were reading about 'Alice' because she was supposed to be a warning," said Moss, who later became an editor at online magazine *Bustle*. "I thought we were reading about 'Alice' because people like her mattered."

Likewise, many closeted teens saw themselves in *Alice*'s narrative—in her mix of lust and self-loathing, hunger and despair. In her desperate wish to *not be this way anymore*.

It was on the surface:

> I'm really confused . . . now when I face a girl it's like facing a boy . . . I want her to touch me, to have her sleep under me, but then I

> feel terrible. I get guilty and it makes me sick.

And in the shadows, hidden by slang:

> In my head I know it's going to be all right because I have Joel [her boyfriend] and my new super straight friends and they'll help me. Besides I'm much stronger than I used to be. I know I am.*

For teens struggling to understand their own desires, or even to just get along with peers and parents, there was kinship in Alice's story, and the particulars could seem incidental.

"It was less important whether the misdeeds were true or not," wrote journalist Nathan Smith in his 2021 essay "Seeking Solace in *Go Ask Alice* as a Queer Teen." "It was important that feelings of alienation, angst and estrangement existed in others too, signaling that my own were valid."

And there lay the crux of *Alice*'s undying appeal. Beneath the dated jargon and drug-porn story line, Alice *acted* the way *you* sometimes felt. If you kept a journal, or filled endless pages with dark, haunted poetry, or felt the stab of a singer speaking *directly to you*, so sweet and sad your heart could barely take it, you had a kindred spirit in Alice. Fiction or not, she was real. And she understood.

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* A follow-up letter stated, "Perhaps you are not aware that I have been an Adolescent Psychologist for over thirty years."

* ESOL classes (English for speakers of other languages) frequently use *Alice* to teach vernacular English, raising the fantastic possibility of future generations using "ofay" and "freak wharf" in casual conversation.

* Viewed through the prism of shock treatment and other "conversion therapies," certain passages turn from mournful to shattering: "The nurses and doctors keep telling me I will feel better, but I still can't get straight."

This Was My Life

> I think I'll go into child guidance when I get out of school. Or maybe I should become a psychologist . . .
>
> Oh dear wonderful, trusting, friendly Diary, that's exactly what I'll do. I'll spend the rest of my life helping people who are just like me!
>
> —*Go Ask Alice*, undated entry

Alden Barrett and Brenda March weren't the only teens stitched into Sparks's writing. Her own past was there, too—all the lowest, saddest moments from a marred adolescence.

Just as Sparks's father walked out on the family, the fathers in her books were frequently absent or worse, and young women were prey for older (often married) men. San Francisco, where Sparks took refuge after her parents' divorce, also turned up repeatedly, and always as it was back then: a noisy cauldron of incipient violence.

But the biggest overlap with Sparks's own life was *ambition*:

> I'm thinking about taking a psychology class next semester . . . I'm so excited I haven't been able to sleep, thinking about actually being able to: control my life, my actions, my doing, my aggressions, my wimpiness, my desires, my EVERYTHING! It will change my complete existence!!!

> —February 10 entry, *Kim: Empty Inside—The Diary of an Anonymous Teenager*
>
> I'm still not sure if I want to be a teacher or a counselor, but I guess I've got lots of time to figure that one out. I'd still love to be a pediatrician if it didn't take so dang long . . . or a writer . . . I don't know.
>
> —August 15 entry, *Annie's Baby: The Diary of Anonymous, a Pregnant Teenager*

Again and again, Sparks's young narrators shared these same few dreams: to become writers, or psychologists, or both. To achieve and accomplish. To redeem themselves via success. To be *somebody*.

• • •

In 2003, Sparks's husband, LaVorn, died at the age of eighty-eight. The boy who'd quit school and gone to work at eleven years old had surpassed all expectations, and then some. In addition to his vast personal wealth, LaVorn had a range of thriving businesses—everything from oil to advertising to apartment buildings. His fleet of vintage cars, all carefully restored and maintained, had once grown so large that he donated several (including a Cadillac, two Model Ts, and a Rolls-Royce) to Utah Valley Community College. In 1993, the school renamed their automotive education facility the "Sparks Automotive Building."

His personal book collection was even more impressive, boasting six hundred rare and exquisite items, among them a first-edition Book of Mormon and a fifteenth-century Bible. Thanks to sizable donations, LaVorn's and Beatrice's names adorned a local library.

Together, they had outlasted a harrowing chain of failures and traumas, finally attaining the good life. In ways both admirable and abhorrent, they embodied the soul of America.

Following LaVorn's death, an aging and grief-stricken Beatrice retreated from public view, but not before writing a mind-bending finale.

Exit

> I do a lot of pretending! I've done it all my life! Pretending is the only thing in my life that I can depend on.
>
> —*Finding Katie: The Diary of Anonymous, a Teenager in Foster Care*

As a book, 2005's *Finding Katie* scarcely mattered. As Beatrice Sparks's farewell, it was something close to surrealist art.

Katie is fifteen. Dumped on the streets of California by an abusive father, she scrapes and struggles, eventually landing in a group home. As Katie adjusts to her new surroundings, the trauma persists, skewing her memory. At times, the past is like a shattered lens, everything angled and blurred, the images overlapping.

"Maybe my whole old life, as I remember it," Katie thinks, "is a crazy hodgepodge of things I've read or seen in movies or on TV."*

At first, Katie worries about blending fact and fiction, but then she makes an amazing discovery: *nobody cares.*

"When I got there I couldn't talk," writes Katie. "I was so full of lies I'd completely forgotten how to communicate. But that didn't seem to matter at all. [Another girl] held my hand, and told me how she had always wanted to become a painter or a schoolteacher or a writer, and how she had always lived a life of almost complete pretend."

• • •

The group-home story line was already a poignant echo: after Sparks's father walked out, her younger siblings had languished in an orphanage. But now, as she completed *Finding Katie*, Sparks faced a sunset version of that same scenario: Courtyard at Jamestown Assisted Living, a facility that promised "privacy and dignity," plus bingo, a weekly movie night, and free exercise tips from a "life enrichment specialist."

It's an ending no one expects for themselves, even when they know it's coming. But Sparks had spent decades warping reality, rewriting life to match what she wanted. Now, as time grew short, she crafted her own epilogue.

In *Finding Katie*'s last few pages, foster child Katie, an aspiring writer and compulsive liar from a broken home, is adopted by Mary Matthews, a respected professor at UCLA.

Professor Matthews has her own rocky past. As a child, she lost her father, and endured a long stretch of pain and isolation. Eventually, however, she became a PhD and married a wonderful man who supported her ambitions.

Then, after a long and happy marriage, Professor Matthews's husband died, and for a time, she thought her life was over. But now that Professor Matthews has adopted Katie, *both* of them are happy and content.

So, to recap: *Finding Katie* concludes with a *teenage* version of Beatrice Sparks (Katie) being adopted by an *adult* version of Beatrice Sparks (Mary Matthews, PhD), all in a book written by the *actual* Beatrice Sparks (*née* Mathews), PhD, who was, of course, a creation of the *real* Beatrice Sparks, the compulsive liar from a broken home.*

• • •

With that, Beatrice Sparks was finished. *Finding Katie*'s closing sentences became her final published words.

"I am somebody! For eternity!"

* Ouroboros alert: “Even now I’m not really sure which parts of myself are real and which parts are things I’ve gotten from books” (*Go Ask Alice*, October 10 entry).

* And to think: this woman spent her life denouncing drugs.

Wish You Were Here

Walking through Pleasant Grove today, it's easy to picture life as it existed circa 1971. Most of the buildings are the same, and the drugstore where Alden Barrett bought his journal still sits at 10 South Main Street, neon sign aglow.

When Alden died, Pleasant Grove had five thousand people. Now, the number is just under forty thousand. Much of that growth is from birth rate, and while some of those children will move away, most will probably stay, creating the next generation of Latter-day Saints.

One May afternoon, almost five decades after Alden Barrett's death, I parked my rental—a white minivan—on 550 South and stared at a redbrick ranch house. Before long, I realized I'd fallen into the same behavior as countless other voyeurs, and I felt a wave of embarrassment.

I stepped out of the minivan and walked toward the house. Overhead, the sun glared in a cloudless blue sky, but a brisk wind stung my cheeks and cut through my thin jacket.

At the sidewalk's edge, I stopped. There, amid a tangle of weeds and overgrown trees, hid a miniature lamppost. The top was broken and dangled over the side. Below that hung a grimy metal nameplate:

BARRETT.

(Photo by Rick Emerson.)

You could walk by a dozen times and never spot it, but once you did, it was all you could see.

I continued to the front porch, then hesitated. It was Sunday. What kind of person bothered a stranger, on a Sunday, in Utah County? I would have turned around, but I'd been lurking out front for a few minutes already, and it seemed like leaving would look even *more* suspicious.

I took a breath, and knocked on the door. After a moment, a woman answered. She looked a bit like Mary-Louise Parker circa *Weeds*.

Standing there with my notebook and pen, I felt ridiculous, like someone pretending to be a 1970s cop. This only got worse with my mangled introduction:

"Good afternoon, ma'am. I apologize for bothering you on a Sunday. My name is Rick Emerson, and I'm researching a book about myths and

rumors in small towns, including Pleasant Grove."*

Halfway through my opening, she knew what was coming, and when I paused, she said, "This is about the kid, right?"

• • •

Linda Butler moved to Pleasant Grove in 1993. Before that, she and her family lived in Portland, Oregon (just down the street from my house, no less). The Butlers are Latter-day Saints, and wanted to raise their kids in a safe, like-minded place. Utah County was an obvious choice, and the Barretts' former house was for sale, so it was an easy decision.

As the deal closed, no one—not the realtor, not the lender, nobody—told the Butlers about Alden's suicide. Some states require presale disclosure of murders or suicides, but Utah doesn't, and for a while, the Butlers were oblivious.

Shortly after moving in, there was some kind of power glitch, and the Butlers called an inspector. As the man checked the cables, Linda Butler asked, "Does the house have bad wiring?"

The inspector kept working, but gave a dry little laugh. "Lady, there's more wrong with this house than just the wiring."

"What do you mean?" asked Butler.

He looked up. "You don't know?"

She didn't. So he told her the whole creepy story.

• • •

Talking about the inspector, Butler shakes her head. She doesn't believe in hauntings, or at least, she doesn't believe *her* house is haunted. She doesn't know quite what to believe about Alden Barrett, a boy who died when Butler herself was fifteen. She only knows that people can't forget him.

"People knock on the door. They poke around the yard," she says with less annoyance than you might expect. "We get letters sometimes, sent to

the Barretts.”

All of this makes me feel awkward, and I prepare to leave. I thank Butler for her time and give her my contact info. I ask if I can follow up at some future point; I might have a few questions about the house itself.

She says yes, and then, as I turn to go, she says, “You might want to come by the Pleasant Grove Library tomorrow.”

Before I can ask why, she says, “I work at the library . . . with a woman who knew him. Knew Alden Barrett.”

I say that I will, then I thank her again, and walk back to my rented minivan.

• • •

“I work at the library . . . with a woman who knew him. Knew Alden Barrett.”

This, it turns out, is something of an understatement. At the Pleasant Grove Library, where she runs a lauded literacy program, Linda Butler works with *three* librarians who knew Alden Barrett, either directly or through siblings.*

At first, I wonder if this is retroactive spin, the same way everyone in Aberdeen hung out with Kurt Cobain. It isn’t. I later check the yearbooks for Pleasant Grove High School, and there they are: all three women, gloss-lipped and looking toward the future.

But even without the yearbooks, the women ring true, telling specific, unremarkable stories about Alden and Teresa; the kind of stories that only stick around when they happen to *you*.

“Remember, that time, with the choir—” begins Tammra Salisbury, at which point, a coworker laughs and skips to the punch line:

“—and Alden fell off the stage.”

Their reactions are sweet and sad, for all the same reasons. Alden was funny and charming, and he’ll never be either again.

Other stories follow. About his basement rock band, and his sometimes-disastrous science projects, and the time he and Teresa started kissing during church.

“They were in the back row,” says one of the women, arching an eyebrow and smiling, “so maybe they thought we couldn’t see them, but it was hard to miss.”

While the women agree about Alden’s intelligence and about his frustration with life in Pleasant Grove, they also agree on the utter waste of his suicide, the squandered potential and needless hurt. That he destroyed his *own* future is obvious, but he did the same to countless other people, especially the people who loved him most. When Alden died, his pain didn’t vanish—it just found new places to live.

• • •

As the women tell stories about Alden and Teresa, I notice a young volunteer eavesdropping. Page is sixteen and archetypically Mormon, with a clean-cut whiteness that’s equal parts Richie Rich and *Pleasantville*.

Page is sorting a stack of books, and as the women talk, he slows, his head tilting toward the conversation. Eventually, he just stops working, leans against a counter, and listens.

Later, Page asks Tammra Salisbury, “What was that about?”

“He was asking about our friend,” she tells him. “Alden Barrett.”

Hearing this, Page, who was born twenty years after *Jay’s Journal* (and who isn’t even *from* Pleasant Grove), nods his head.

“The kid who’s the high school ghost, right?”

Recounting this exchange, Salisbury shakes her head, then puffs a little air.

“It’s like he’s not even a person anymore,” she says. “He’s like a myth or a legend or something.”

• • •

There are no copies of *Jay’s Journal* at the Pleasant Grove Library. Even in the age of e-books, paper editions of *Jay* tend to vanish. “After twenty or so

copies got stolen," says one librarian, "we just said, 'Enough is enough.'" *Jay* is still in the catalog, but the space on the shelf is empty.

It hasn't stopped the chatter. "It's on a five-year cycle," says Carolyn Corry, who knew Alden through her older sister. "Every five years or so, a new batch of kids hears about Alden—about Jay—and they start asking questions. Eventually, they find out I knew him, and they start asking *me* questions."

Corry's own children (now grown) came to her shortly after starting at PGHS. They'd heard the talk and wanted the truth. Corry told them most of it, but skipped the gory details. They'd hear those eventually, she figured. No need to rush.

As for Linda Butler, the electrical inspector's response was an eye-opener. She sat her kids down and explained things, including the odious rumors. Like Corry, she omitted the explicit parts, but didn't want her kids to be blindsided. The myth wasn't fading anytime soon.

Interviewed separately, the three librarians who knew Alden Barrett gave the same basic timeline: In a town of five thousand people, where secrets were hard to keep, no one heard an inkling of talk about Alden and witchcraft until after *Jay's Journal*, nearly a decade removed from his suicide. Even Corry, who heard secondhand stories from her older sister ("She told me about going into the girls' bathroom and seeing the trash cans dancing around; they were bouncing and sort of . . . levitating"), discounts *Jay's Journal* and assumes that Sparks just wanted to sell books. Later, Salisbury uses the very same phrase: "I think she just wanted to sell books."

None of the women ever met—or otherwise spoke with—Beatrice Sparks.

• • •

After a few hours, I pack up my notes and say my goodbyes. The women have been exceedingly gracious, answering questions from a total stranger—questions that stir old, half-buried memories.

On my way out, I share a few words with Tammra Salisbury, who had the strongest reaction to the old stories, her tears and laughter sometimes

merging. I thank her for talking with me, and just before I leave, she reflects on Page, the teenage volunteer who knows the whole story, sort of.

"Alden's 'the high school ghost,'" says Salisbury. "For him to be remembered like that, overshadowing who he really was . . . Alden deserves better than that."

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* Saying, "I'm working on a book about *Go Ask Alice*" would have been more accurate, but also more confusing. Ditto "I'm writing about Beatrice Sparks," a woman whose name (even in Mormon circles) often rings no bells. Since the whole saga centered on gossip's path through insular and/or suburban communities, I felt okay about my intro.

* One of the three, a woman whose brother committed suicide, asked to remain anonymous. I've redacted her comments accordingly, editing for clarity when needed.

EPILOGUE

After Forever

ART LINKLETTER continued his fight against drug addiction, pushing for medical treatment and rational strategies—an evolution that went largely unnoticed. He occasionally relapsed into fury (especially on the subject of Timothy Leary), but embraced the decriminalization of marijuana and other soft drugs, and renounced his earlier, zero-tolerance approach.

"Almost all my assumptions about drug education were wrong," Linkletter wrote in 1973. "Each time one of my interviews is shown, there is no one to say, 'That was two years ago, while I was still learning.'"

As for *Go Ask Alice*, Linkletter stopped short of a public disavowal, but his endorsement vanished from the cover and never returned.

"The time for hating and revenge is past," said Linkletter. "Once I thought it was 'us' against 'them'—the good people against the monsters. Now I see that unless we search for answers, we'll never find them."

He died in 2010 at the age of ninety-seven.

DR. DOYLE BARRETT died on January 4, 2003, aged seventy-seven. He is buried next to Alden in Pleasant Grove City Cemetery.

MARCELLA BARRETT died on December 15, 2007, at the age of eighty-three. She is buried next to her first husband (Bryan Cook, who died in 1948) in Emery County, Utah.

ELAINE BARRETT, Alden's younger sister, got married in her senior year of high school. More than four decades later, she and Mike are still together. They live in the Midwest.

SCOTT BARRETT eventually reconciled with his parents. In 1996, he self-published *A Place in the Sun*, his own account of Alden's life and death. The book got some local press, then faded from sight. On the forty-fourth anniversary of Alden's suicide, Scott said via Facebook, "A burning question you need to ask yourself if you ever contemplate taking your own life: Who is going to find you?"

After multiple scrapes with the law, Scott moved to Arizona and remarried. In 2017, as I was writing this book, Scott was convicted of molesting an eight-year-old girl and received a chain of sentences totaling twenty-nine years. Scott maintains his innocence.

TERESA BLAIN struggled with grief and guilt following Alden's suicide, and while others spent years in therapy, Teresa did most of her healing alone. "I just got past it, little by little," she says, adding, "sometimes I felt Alden's presence reassuring me."

In time, she found a measure of peace, and is now a married mother of three, living on the East Coast. She has never read *Jay's Journal*.

After editing *It Happened to Nancy*, ELLEN KRIEGER moved to Simon & Schuster as vice president/editorial director of their children's publishing division, where she oversaw sleek new editions of *Go Ask Alice* and *Jay's Journal*. For the *Alice* update alone, Simon & Schuster paid Beatrice Sparks a new advance of fifty thousand dollars.

In 2021, reviewing her correspondence with Beatrice Sparks, Krieger concluded, "This woman was a con artist."

Also in 2021, Dr. Susan Chu of the Centers for Disease Control (Sparks's alleged fact-checker for *It Happened to Nancy*) said she "does not recall ever reviewing [*It Happened to Nancy*] and has no comments or endorsement on its content."

SPECIAL AGENT KENNETH V. LANNING remained with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Perhaps inevitably, his skepticism about occult crime temporarily boomeranged, with a handful of cult truthers accusing him of being a closet Satanist. Lanning shrugged and continued doing his job.

Lanning's reports from the era (particularly 1996's *The Witch-Hunt, The Backlash, and Professionalism*) are now viewed as crucial accounts of the Satanic Panic—exemplars of rational integrity amid mindless hysteria.

In 1997, Lanning received the FBI Director's Award for Special Achievement for his work on behalf of missing and exploited children. He retired from the bureau in 2000, and is now a private consultant specializing in children's issues.

DETECTIVE SANDRA GALLANT gradually distanced herself from claims of a Satanic crime wave and downplayed her "pre-1986 police educational materials." Those materials included her Quantico handout, which had already saturated law enforcement and wider society.

Asked in 2021 if she felt any guilt over her past activities, such as testifying at ritual abuse trials, Gallant denied the premise.

"Why should I feel responsible for somebody else's thoughts and opinions?" she responded. "I have no effect on that. I never testified in *one case* involving any of this."

When I mentioned her 1985 trial testimony in Contra Costa County (see page 258), Gallant grew angry, saying, "I never testified in *any* such case. I think if I did, I would certainly remember."

After I sent Gallant a *San Francisco Examiner* article* describing her testimony in the 1985 case, she responded, "I see the article, but still do not recall this trial."

KATHRYN FITZGERALD, who acquired and edited *Go Ask Alice* for Prentice-Hall, became vice president of PH's trade division. In 1977, she left publishing for a job in finance. Fitzgerald eventually moved to Paris, France, where she died in 2020, aged seventy-eight.

WEBSTER SCHOTT, whose review in the *New York Times* helped launch *Go Ask Alice* to super-success, died in 2020 at the age of ninety-three. Interviewed shortly before his death, Schott said he had struggled with how to review the supposed diary.

"I couldn't decide," said Schott. "That is, the truth was not available. There was no way to establish the authenticity of the work, in the sense of being real, or whether it was conjured up as a way of writing a book that would sell."

Asked if a "fiction" label would have changed his review, Schott said, "Of course. I would have been reluctant to embrace it as a work of significance. That is, if it was fake, it was fraudulent."

MORGAN CURRAN, who discovered *Go Ask Alice* while grappling with her sister's meth addiction, kept her vow to avoid drugs, and in 2015, she enrolled at Nebraska's College of Technical Agriculture.

In early 2016, doctors diagnosed Curran with cardiomyopathy—an abnormal thickening of the heart muscle. Even scarier, the disease had been there for at least two years, masquerading as severe asthma. If Curran had taken hard drugs in any serious quantity, they might have killed her on the spot.

In 2019, Curran completed college, graduating as salutatorian.

Her sister, Sam, continues to battle addiction.

ALLEEN PACE NILSEN, whose *School Library Journal* article "The House That Alice Built" so angered Beatrice Sparks, is now a Professor Emeritus in the English Department at Arizona State University. She is the author of numerous books on young adult literature, and is widely considered an expert on the genre. In 2015, Nilsen gave an acclaimed seminar on the impact and symbolism of the two *Alices*: Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Go Ask Alice*.

TOBI HUDSON now describes herself as "an inactive Mormon," but like many who leave the Church, she monitors its progress and missteps as closely as any active member. She and her husband currently live outside the United States.

In 2016, forty-five years after ceasing contact, Tobi emailed Brenda March, apologizing for the disappearance and explaining the circumstances. “If you are willing,” wrote Tobi, “I would be glad to share with you where life has led me, and I would be happy to hear about how you have been, how you are now, and what you are doing. In any event, I ask for your understanding and forgiveness.”

BRENDA MARCH survived a tumultuous adolescence and, in later years, overcame substance abuse. She excelled in college, attaining multiple degrees, and now works with at-risk communities. She is active within the Mormon Church and does frequent social outreach.

In 2016, she responded to Tobi Hudson’s email, and they have remained in contact.

Brenda has never read *Go Ask Alice*.

ALDEN BARRETT missed out on *Star Wars*, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and *The Book of Mormon: The Musical*. He never heard *The Wall* or *Exile on Main St.*, and he never glimpsed the internet.

Just ten days after Alden’s death, Congress proposed a constitutional amendment lowering the voting age to eighteen. Despite opposition from seven states (including Utah), the amendment became law on July 5, 1971. It was the fastest ratification in US history.* Had he still been alive, Alden could have voted against Nixon in 1972, then watched him resign in disgrace two years later.

The military draft, which had haunted Alden for years, ended in June of 1973. The final batch of draftees were men born in 1952; Alden, who was born in 1954, would have been free and clear. The Vietnam War ended on April 30, 1975.

Ten years after putting Alden’s headstone in storage, the family returned it to the burial plot in Pleasant Grove City Cemetery. The marker is still occasionally defaced, and Alden’s porcelain photo has been largely chipped away. With no one left to maintain it, the image will eventually vanish.

(Photo by Rick Emerson.)

JAY'S JOURNAL has existed for nearly fifty years—three times longer than Alden Barrett's entire life.

In 2004, rumors circulated that "Beatrice Sparks" was a pen name for *Marcella Barrett*. The claim apparently started on Wikipedia, and despite a retraction by the user, the story persists, another part of Pleasant Grove lore.

The Library of Congress currently lists *Jay's Journal* as "fiction," but the latest edition of the book itself carries no designation at all, leaving readers (and booksellers) to decide for themselves. In Portland, Oregon, where I live, the nearest bookstore stocks multiple copies of *Jay*. The price tags all say "Biography."

GO ASK ALICE has sold nearly six million copies, and is often bundled for sale with *Jay's Journal*. Most new copies of *Jay* also contain a five-page sample of *Go Ask Alice*, and in 2006, Simon & Schuster produced a special slipcase version, packaging *Jay* and *Alice* in a single, elegant box.

In 2012, Simon & Schuster launched Anonymous Diaries—a new line of books "in the tradition of *Go Ask Alice*." Each book tells a cautionary tale in diary form, complete with grim, third-person epilogues ("Teen Found Dead of Accidental Overdose, Coroner Rules") and punchy, *Alice*-esque taglines ("Lucy was a good girl, living a good life. One night, one party, changed everything"). Each cover mimics *Alice*'s layout, with a similar font and half-shadowed face. By 2021, the series contained seven titles, including *Lucy in the Sky*, *The Book of David* . . . and *Jay's Journal.*

As of this writing, the Library of Congress has four separate entries for *Go Ask Alice*. No two are the same, and only one of the entries agrees with itself. (The entry for Avon's paperback edition says both "fiction" and "autobiography.")

In December 2020, Simon & Schuster released a fiftieth-anniversary edition of *Go Ask Alice*. Its inside copyright page says "fiction," but its Library of Congress entry says "*not* fiction."

The National Library of Medicine, which is operated by the National Institutes of Health and is the world's largest collection of medical books, specifically lists *Go Ask Alice* as "not fiction."

BEATRICE RUBY MATHEWS SPARKS died in her sleep on May 25, 2012. She was ninety-five years old.

Sparks's grudge against Alleen Pace Nilsen proved literally unkillable. Arriving at Sparks's funeral, Nilsen discovered that Sparks—whom Nilsen had not seen in *thirty-three years*—had left instructions barring her from the ceremony. Undeterred, Nilsen sent her daughter, Nicolette, who sat in the back and made copious notes.

In the course of her life, Beatrice Sparks claimed to have attended at least five colleges. Only one—Brigham Young University—has any record of her enrollment: five months in 1989. The university confirms that Sparks did not graduate.*

Yet even in death, Sparks continues to shape her own image. Asked about the alleged PhD, a researcher at BYU replied that Sparks "apparently attended UCLA." When I asked where that info came from, the researcher said, "Wikipedia," then noted, "[BYU] wrote the Wikipedia page for her, so that information would have come from our collection of materials."

Sparks left numerous unfinished projects, including *Out of the Dark* (which, according to its summary, would draw from audiotaped sessions with Sparks's "patients") and *How to Be Happy*, a self-help book for adults. Though never completed, *How to Be Happy* already had ringing endorsements . . . from two nonexistent doctors.

Beatrice Sparks is buried next to LaVorn in Orem City Cemetery—just a short distance from the apartment where Marcella Barrett spent her final years.

Sparks's headstone reads, "Families are Forever."

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* A.S. Ross, "Police Believe in Violent Cults," *San Francisco Examiner*, September 29, 1986.

* The seven opposing states were Florida, Kentucky, Mississippi, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, and Utah.

* Life is long, and anything is possible; proof of a PhD (or master's, or BA, or whatever) may eventually surface. But a *crate* of diplomas wouldn't offset Sparks's gut-level cruelties, or reconcile her other deceptions. If anything, it might reveal them as far more deliberate, and Sparks herself as even more villainous.

We project our own paranoia onto the young. They are the dark and confused result of what we have failed to be.

—Art Linkletter, *Drugs at My Doorstep*, 1973

Author's Note, Part Two

This project began in January 2015. I was having breakfast with my friend Peter Ames Carlin, a talented and gracious author who probably wrote two books in the time it took me to compose this sentence.

Peter asked what I was working on, and I bluffed something about a book on organized crime. It sounded dull, even to me, but it still beat the truth: I was doing absolutely nothing, and not in the awesome, *Office Space* sense. My wife and I had recently split—mostly my fault—and I was in a state of dangerous drift.

Driving home from breakfast, I was on mental autopilot (see above statement re: dangerous drift) when I had one of those ridiculous "out of the blue" moments. (I say "ridiculous" because such moments usually sound fake in the retelling, and even when they don't, they're basically useless. Knowing that Paul McCartney dreamed the melody to "Yesterday" doesn't help anyone write better songs; it's mostly just irritating.)

Still, as I approached Southeast Cesar Chavez Boulevard, I saw a *literal* blue flash: an arc of bright azure across my field of vision. When it receded, I had the crux: the true story of *Go Ask Alice* and the woman behind it.*

Six years, two agents, one pandemic, and countless drafts later, I finished writing this book. And now—in theory—you've finished reading it, so it's time to keep my promise and talk about research.

I thought long and hard about whether to include pages (and pages) of citations for every last stat and statement. In the end, I didn't. Here's why:

The book's content falls into three basic categories:

1. Things that are both public and checkable (causes of death, the weather on a given day, Nixon's Oval Office musings, etc.).
2. Things that aren't public *per se*, but are still checkable (e.g., the layout of Quantico's underground offices circa 1983; the general format of a "worthiness interview").
3. Things that aren't public and, for reasons of privacy, aren't currently checkable. (This mainly applies to Brenda March, Tobi Hudson, and Youth Academy 1970.)

The first two categories comprise most of the book, and arguably don't need citations; in most cases, a simple web search or phone call will yield the info. Part of this stems from writing a book during COVID, when in-person research abruptly stopped. Mostly, however, it stems from approach: I wanted to write a fast-paced, readable book that stuck to the facts. Gather enough facts, and you have the story.

The third category is the smallest, and that's not a coincidence. A book about unsourced allegations and unnamed accusers can't rely on those same techniques, and if I'd faced that problem with the rest of the book, I would have scrapped the whole thing. (Likewise, if Brenda March felt comfortable being identified, there probably wouldn't *be* a third category. Understandably, she prefers to remain anonymous, and that outweighs everything else.) As it stands, the book's other sections are solid enough that the Brenda/Tobi chapters hopefully ring true, cosmetic changes and all. You'll be the judge of that.

As for the wealth of details (the "how can he possibly know that?" stuff), a lot of it was self-selecting, meaning you don't see the sections I shortened or removed—sections that *lacked* evidence or fine-grain specifics.

If you think of this story and all its events—everything from Beatrice Sparks's birth to the final glimpse of Pleasant Grove—as a movie, then this book is an extensive, immersive recap (or adaptation), with one key distinction: I'm working with damaged film. Some scenes are largely intact, while others exist as only a few scratched frames. Many are missing entirely. Sometimes context helps fill in the gaps, and sometimes all you can do is wonder.

Listing every site and database I used over the past six years is impossible, but a few deserve special mention: Ancestry.com, Newspapers.com, FamilySearch.org, Archive.org, and PublishersWeekly.com. (Classmates.com was a frustrating exercise in visual pain and perhaps the most off-putting website I've ever encountered. Not recommended.)

Also: libraries, libraries, libraries. Without libraries and the people who run them, this book wouldn't exist and my childhood would have been unendurable. Special note goes to the Library of Congress, whose staff did their best to serve three hundred million people (including me) during a pandemic, and the Harold B. Lee Memorial Library at Brigham Young University, whose archives (and general vibe) are second to none.

Gathering five hundred reams of material is pointless if you can't search it, so FineReader (a computer app that turns image files into searchable documents) was a lifesaver. The same goes for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association's site, NOAA.gov, which gives weather records by zip code for most twentieth-century dates.

A *lot* of this book, and especially the up-close, personal stuff, came from interviews, and technology made those interviews easier, especially once COVID-19 hit. Thanks to the internet, long-distance phone calls no longer carry the risk of bankruptcy, and video calling allows for real-time responses to historical documents. Without those breakthroughs, I would have been sunk.

• • •

To answer a few (anticipated) questions:

Q: *If Tobi's parents made her burn Brenda's letters, how do you know what those letters said?*

A: Two big helpings of luck. First, Tobi Hudson wrote a lot of short fiction in high school, and some of her stories drew from real life, including her tumultuous friendship with Brenda.

An important distinction: unlike Beatrice Sparks *vis-à-vis* Alden Barrett, Tobi worked to shield Brenda's identity, but it was an iterative process, with

each draft of a story changing more details. Fortunately, Tobi was/is something of a pack rat, and those early drafts—while never published—give detailed accounts of the Brenda/Tobi/Youth Academy saga. What's more, they were written soon after the real-life events, before time (and fallible human memory) could warp them. Tobi's writing not only corroborated what I'd already heard, but took the story from gray scale to Technicolor. That's something I never could have planned for, and even now, I boggle at the sheer good fortune of it.

Second, in her quest to understand Brenda's headspace, Tobi hand-copied certain portions of Brenda's letters, and some of those excerpts survived the parental purge.

Q: *Alden died at sixteen—how do you know his life and/or thoughts?*

A: Scott Barrett's 1996 book, *A Place in the Sun*, was a massive help. Written over many years and self-published on a modest budget, *A Place in the Sun* has its rough edges, but in terms of raw info, it was a solid, early guide, and gave a structured look at Alden's life, especially his final few months. Alden's writing, his drawings and poetry, his often atrocious spelling, and his fractured, mercurial moods—all are on full display in Scott's book. Without it, my job would have been much harder, and the road to completion much longer.

Though several of Alden's friends died young, many are still alive, and were generous with their time and recollections. Others died in middle age, but lived long enough to speak with Scott Barrett. Taken together, these interviews gave insights into Alden's life and stated beliefs, and those of long-ago comrades. Likewise, many of the quotes in Part Two came from Scott's own published conversations with Doyle, Marcella, and other key figures; those excerpts added immeasurably to this book, and I am deeply grateful.

Side note: The Pleasant Grove High School yearbook for 1971 (the year Alden died) shows a student named "Richard Emerson." No, it's not me. Yes, it weirds me out a little.

Q: *How could you know Beatrice Sparks's thoughts about [whatever]?*

A: In terms of *events*, Beatrice Sparks was—to put it mildly—an unreliable source. (When I spoke with her son, LaVorn Jr., he opened with a disclaimer: “No one knows her story . . . including me.”) In terms of outlook, however, she was far more consistent. In Sparks’s personal letters, in her essays and speeches, and in numerous interviews across several decades, she voiced a fairly stable set of beliefs—about drugs, about religion, about her career/success, and about divisive social questions. (Sparks on the school-busing issue: “People only get burned in a melting pot.”) Though “intractable” is too strong a word, her opinions were deep-set, and a lot of things weren’t up for debate.

Certain statements, especially her aphorisms (e.g., “if you’re not happy, you’re doing something wrong; change it”), came from Sparks’s correspondence with readers, her nonfiction writing, and her classes at Youth Academy. Other specifics came from business documents, sometimes as color commentary: Sparks occasionally put notes in the margins, a final attempt at molding the truth.

Sparks’s first book, *Key to Happiness*, gave a surprisingly clear window into her thoughts, especially her determination to rise above the past. “If you have any misgivings about your background or your family,” wrote Sparks, “don’t let them stand in the way . . . you are not going to be judged by what your family did or are, but by what you do and are!”

• • •

Beatrice Sparks wasn’t alone in modifying her backstory. People tend to paint themselves in the best light possible, and shameful or awkward moments are minimized or reframed. We all do this; it’s part of the human impulse. What’s more, we often do it unconsciously, airbrushing our memories to match our current beliefs and self-image.

We also do it to fill in the gaps, and gaps are unavoidable. Human memory is insanely flawed, and anyone who says different is deluding themselves. Nearly everyone involved in this story has wavered on some point or other, and certain things that should be clear-cut are mystifyingly vague. Alden shot himself in a room adjacent to several other rooms, and

the flat-panel walls would have amplified the noise, yet Scott and Elaine Barrett seemingly didn't hear it. Maybe it was a quirk of the house's layout, or of the pistol's small caliber combined with the rainstorm. Maybe it didn't "sound" like a gunshot, so they heard it but filtered it out. In the end, it probably doesn't matter, but it's puzzling all the same.

Likewise, there's a minor debate about Alden's suicide note, specifically its final line. By some accounts, it read, "One last request—all my worldly possessions go to Teresa as my wedding present." At first glance, this seems correct: a reference to Alden and Teresa's midnight wedding. Scott, however, remembers things differently, and says Alden left everything to John Lundgren, one of several friends engaged to be married. The original note, which Marcella shared with Sparks, went missing some years ago; rather than guess at the answer, I omitted the line, preserving the rest. As with the gunshot acoustics, this doesn't alter the day's basic outcome, but it puts another blur in the film.

From October 1969 until his death four decades later, Art Linkletter answered literally thousands of questions about Diane's suicide. His responses (about the role LSD played, for instance) sometimes shifted with his mood or in response to the interviewer's own beliefs. When speaking with religious or conservative figures, Linkletter took a stronger tack on enforcement; when speaking with physicians or counselors, he emphasized the need for treatment.

Other contradictions were starker, if more understandable. Most accounts of Diane's suicide have Art hearing the news from his son Robert. On at least one occasion, however, Art said the call came from his *lawyer* (who had presumably been contacted by the police). It's possible that Robert and the lawyer phoned together, or that they made separate calls at around the same time. The evidence suggests it was Robert, and that's how I wrote it, but all three men are dead, and there's probably no one left who can say for sure. Such is life, and such is history.

• • •

I give these examples for one big reason. There's a world of difference (to me, at least) between knowing you've printed some factual errors and *knowingly printing* a factual error. The former is painful and nearly unavoidable; the result of countless drafts, revisions, conflicting accounts, delayed corrections/discoveries, and simple human fuckups. The latter is actively wrong and arguably evil—a willful abuse of the reader's trust.

I've undoubtedly made mistakes in this telling. I have to live with that. I also have to live with myself, and except where privacy outweighs exposure, I've written nothing in this book that I know to be false.

Moralizing is dangerous for someone with a checkered past; I spent a lot of my life as a jackass radio host, and that doesn't lead to moderation or middle-ground. Most of my offensive and/or juvenile statements are out there, floating around. They're not hard to find, and you may or may not take them seriously. Ultimately, this isn't my story, and until the very end (literally and figuratively), I worked to keep myself out of it. The final stretch, where I talk with the women at the Pleasant Grove Library, required my presence, and that's only fair. We're all part of history; only the viewpoint changes.

Speaking of history: two of my benchmarks for accuracy and style (and the blending of one with the other) were Erik Larson's *The Devil in the White City* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2003) and Nick Bilton's *American Kingpin* (New York: Portfolio, 2017). Larson shames me with his meticulous research, and Bilton turns facts into jet-propelled drama. I hate them both, but in the good way.

Finally: a great many people spoke with me for this book. For some, cooperation carried an emotional cost—like grief, or guilt, or the resurgence of long-buried anger. For a few, the cost was arguably higher, and meant confirming or revisiting their own mistakes or misdeeds.

To paraphrase the activist Bryan Stevenson, we are more than our worst transgressions. Whatever their particular path and history, each person I interviewed played a part in telling this story. They are counted.

Thanks for reading . . . and thanks for *reading*.

—Rick Emerson

Portland, Oregon, USA

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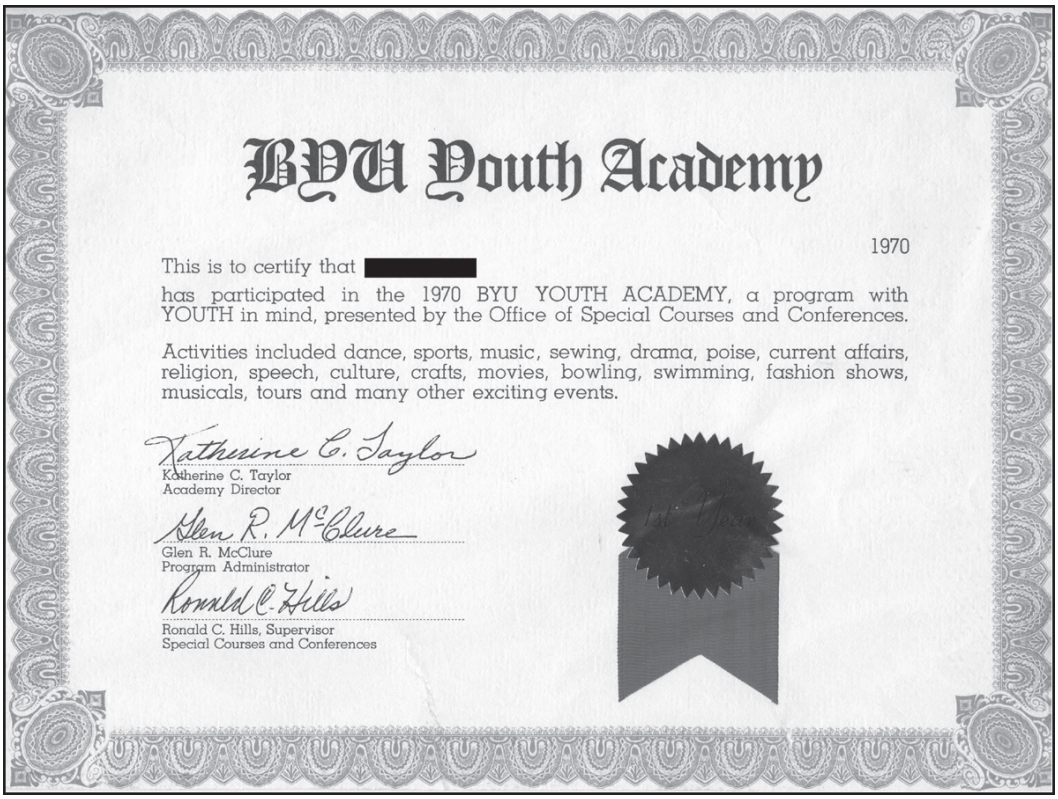
* I assume most people experience some version of this. The clinical term is synesthesia, and it's like augmented reality without the goggles, but mine is usually linked to music; it's almost never from an *idea*.

Appendix



BYU Youth Academy

1970

This is to certify that [redacted]

has participated in the 1970 BYU YOUTH ACADEMY, a program with YOUTH in mind, presented by the Office of Special Courses and Conferences.

Activities included dance, sports, music, sewing, drama, poise, current affairs, religion, speech, culture, crafts, movies, bowling, swimming, fashion shows, musicals, tours and many other exciting events.

Katherine C. Taylor
Academy Director

Glen R. McClure
Program Administrator

Ronald C. Hills, Supervisor
Special Courses and Conferences

Tobi Hudson's participation certificate for Brigham Young University's "Youth Academy for Girls," summer 1970. (Courtesy of Tobi Hudson; Brigham Young University.)

Go ask Alice

Full Record **MARC Tags**

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040	__	|**a** DLC |**c** DLC |**d** DLC
042	__	|**a** lcac
050	10	|**a** PZ7 |**b** .G534 1982
082	00	|**a** [Fic] |**2** 19
245	00	|**a** Go ask Alice / |**c** Anonymous.
260	__	|**a** New York, N.Y. : |**b** Avon Books, |**c** [1982] c1971.
300	__	|**a** 189 p. ; |**c** 18 cm.
490	0_	|**a** An Avon/Flare book
490	0_	|**a** Flare autobiography
520	__	|**a** A fifteen-year-old drug user chronicles her daily struggle to escape the pull of the drug world.
650	_1	|**a** Drug abuse |**x** Fiction.
650	_1	|**a** Diaries |**v** Fiction.

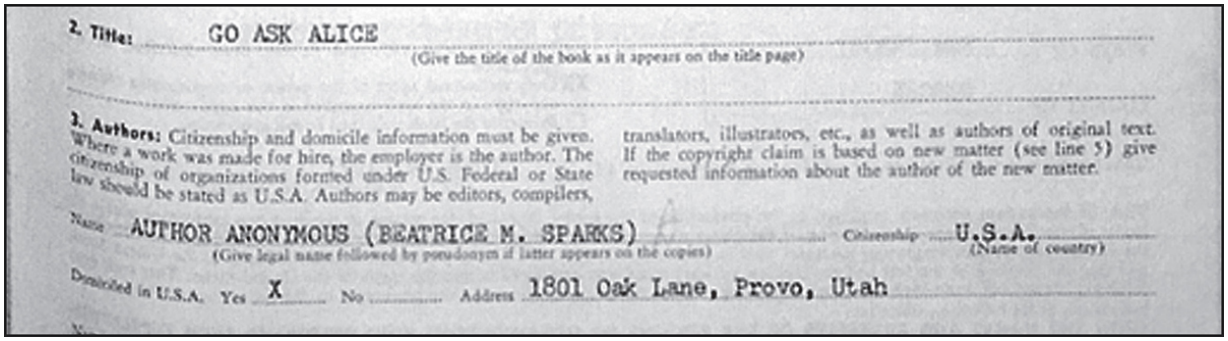
1

Flare autobiography

Fiction

Like most modern libraries, the Library of Congress stores its catalog data in both plain language and a machine-readable code called MARC. In MARC, the thirty-third character of field 008 tags a book as "fiction" (the numeral "1"), "not fiction" (a zero), "poetry" (the letter "p"), and so on. The above catalog entry (for Avon Flare's 1982 Go Ask Alice *paperback) has a "1" for fiction, yet also says "Flare autobiography." Further down, the "fiction" label reappears. The physical book, meanwhile, says "A Real Diary."*

As of this writing, the catalog entry for Simon & Schuster's fiftieth-anniversary edition of Go Ask Alice *is tagged "0" for "not fiction." (Courtesy of Library of Congress online catalog, 2021).*



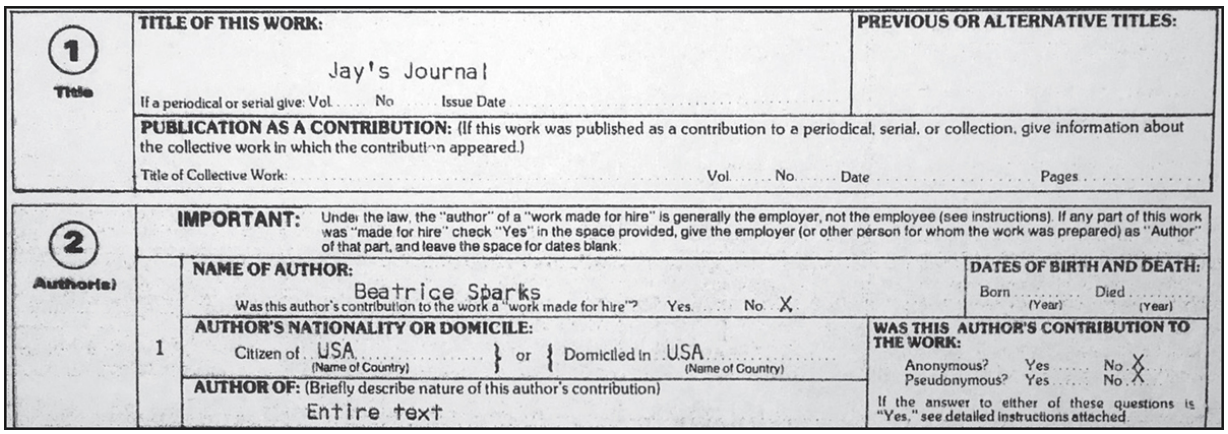
2. Title: GO ASK ALICE
(Give the title of the book as it appears on the title page)

3. Authors: Citizenship and domicile information must be given. Where a work was made for hire, the employer is the author. The citizenship of organizations formed under U.S. Federal or State law should be stated as U.S.A. Authors may be editors, compilers, translators, illustrators, etc., as well as authors of original text. If the copyright claim is based on new matter (see line 5) give requested information about the author of the new matter.

Name AUTHOR ANONYMOUS (BEATRICE M. SPARKS) Citizenship U.S.A. (Name of country)
(Give legal name followed by pseudonym if latter appears on the copies)

Domiciled in U.S.A. Yes X No ..... Address 1801 Oak Lane, Provo, Utah

A page from Go Ask Alice*'s original copyright application, and a perfect example of systemic vagueness. While Section 3 lists "Beatrice M. Sparks" as* Alice*'s author, it also states that "authors may be editors, compilers, translators, illustrators, etc." In other words:* you're on your own, kids. *(Courtesy of Library of Congress, Copyright Office.)*



1 Title

TITLE OF THIS WORK: Jay's Journal
If a periodical or serial give: Vol. ..... No ..... Issue Date .....

PREVIOUS OR ALTERNATIVE TITLES:

PUBLICATION AS A CONTRIBUTION: (If this work was published as a contribution to a periodical, serial, or collection, give information about the collective work in which the contribution appeared.)
Title of Collective Work: ..... Vol. ..... No. ..... Date ..... Pages .....

2 Author(s)

IMPORTANT: Under the law, the "author" of a "work made for hire" is generally the employer, not the employee (see instructions). If any part of this work was "made for hire" check "Yes" in the space provided, give the employer (or other person for whom the work was prepared) as "Author" of that part, and leave the space for dates blank.

1

NAME OF AUTHOR: Beatrice Sparks
Was this author's contribution to the work a "work made for hire"? Yes ..... No X

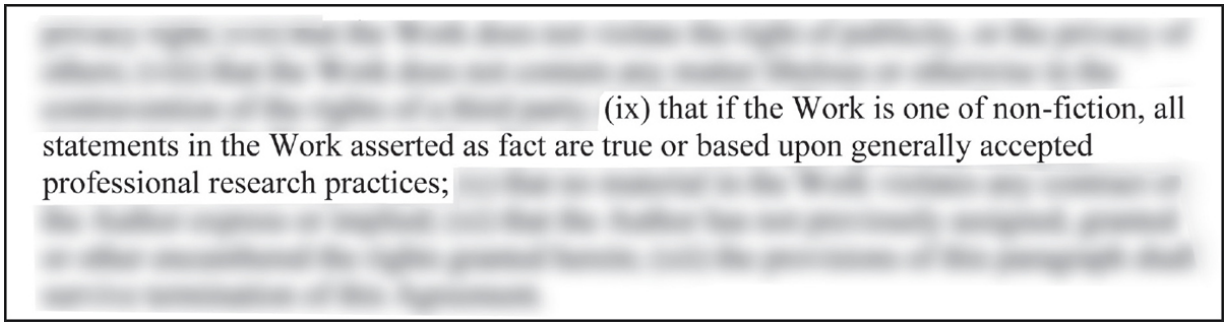
DATES OF BIRTH AND DEATH: Born ..... (Year) Died ..... (Year)

AUTHOR'S NATIONALITY OR DOMICILE: Citizen of USA (Name of Country) or Domiciled in USA (Name of Country)

AUTHOR OF: (Briefly describe nature of this author's contribution) Entire text

WAS THIS AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE WORK: Anonymous? Yes ..... No X Pseudonymous? Yes ..... No X
If the answer to either of these questions is "Yes," see detailed instructions attached.

The original copyright application for Jay's Journal *(also known as "a federal document in which no one shall knowingly make a false representation of material fact"). Section 2, line 1 describes Beatrice Sparks's contribution as "entire text" and as neither anonymous or pseudonymous. (Courtesy of Library of Congress, Copyright Office.)*



(ix) that if the Work is one of non-fiction, all statements in the Work asserted as fact are true or based upon generally accepted professional research practices;

From my contract for this book. It stipulates that fact-checking is my responsibility, and that I solemnly swear not to lie. (Courtesy of BenBella Books.)

Acknowledgments

Timelines and mental flux (read: my tiny human brain) all but guarantee that I've omitted someone crucial. If you are that person, and you're reading this page looking for your name, I officially feel terrible and owe you a drink.

The front line: Tim Wojcik and everyone at Levine Greenberg Rostan Literary Agency, Peter Ames Carlin, everyone at BenBella Books (including, but not limited to: Glenn Yeffeth, Leah Wilson, Sarah Avinger, Adrienne Lang, Alicia Kania, Jennifer Canzoneri, and Rachel Phares). Special thanks to my editor, Vy Tran, who broke me of several bad habits, and whose accuracy-in-suggestion rate exceeded 98 percent.

Early readers/givers of crucial feedback: Angela Bruce, Francesca Cronan, Sarah X. Dylan, Greg Nibler, Richelle Ricard, and James Stevens. Thanks also to Dan Conaway at Writers House.

Some of the folks who shared their knowledge and insight, often in response to a call/email/visit from a total stranger: Carol Anderson, Kevin Bach, Scott Barrett, Teresa Blain, Jana Brubaker, Linda Burnes, Linda Butler, Johnny Carr, Carol Cartaino, Patrick Christian, Dr. Susan Chu, Diana Collier, Carolyn Corry, Jeri Craner, Morgan Curran, Sarah Faber, Nathan Farb, Kathryn Fitzgerald, Sandi Gallant, Denise Green, Nicolette Handros, Tobi Hudson, Dean Huffaker, Roma Kreeger, Ellen Krieger, Kenneth Lanning, Sharon Linkletter, Terri Loebker, Brenda March, Tim McCaffery, Shaun McCausland, Gwen Montgomery, Alleen Pace Nilsen, Tammra Salisbury, Webster Schott, Gary Soto, LaVorn Sparks Jr., Nicole Stanley MD, Mike Tunnell, Nicolette Wickman.

Friends, colleagues, and life support: Bruce Agler, Jessica Anaya (I truly am so very glad you exist), Laurie Halse Anderson, Emily B., Amy Berkower, Delores and Ralph Borchert, Kelly Clarke, Steve Denari, Alexandra Elbakyan, Mike Everhart, Bethany F., Jeff Futzer (a thousand thanks), Dan Gemeinhart, Ida Gifford (RIP), Lara Gifford, Dr. Rory Green, Tammy Hernandez, Teddy Howard, Precision Images, Helen Raptis, Patricia and Barry Reed, Susan Reynolds, Michelle S., Safeway #1627, Sigfried Seeliger, Katrina Vanderfleet, David Walker, and Ryan White.

Possession/vampire expertise: Laura C. Howard ❤

Musical accompaniment: *The Vietnam War*, by Trent Reznor & Atticus Ross; *West of Memphis*, by Nick Cave & Warren Ellis; *Exile on Main St.*, by the Rolling Stones; “Thirteen,” by Big Star; the Black Angels discography.

As my attorney: Aaron J. Cronan, Esq.

Praise to Rick Perlstein, who showed the way, and Tom O’Neill, who never gave up. And eternal thanks to Andy Weir, whose fictional astronaut saved my life.

Courtney: There are no words or percentages big enough. Without you, this book—and its author—might still *exist*, but both would feel colorless and incomplete. You made, and make, the difference. I love you.

Photo Credits

Beatrice Sparks, 1967: courtesy of *Daily Herald*
Art Linkletter, 1958: courtesy of NBC Television
Art and Diane Linkletter, 1968: courtesy of CBS Television, Photo Division
Art Linkletter and Richard Nixon, 1969: courtesy of White House Photo Office/Ollie Atkins and Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum
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Barrett House, 1960: courtesy of Utah County Recorder's Office
Alden with debate team/Alden Barrett yearbook photo/Teresa Blain yearbook photo: courtesy of Pleasant Grove High School
Alden at Wasatch Academy: courtesy of Wasatch Academy
Alden and Scott Barrett, 1962: courtesy of Scott Barrett
Alden and Teresa at Sweater Swing: courtesy of Pleasant Grove High School and Scott Barrett
Alden headstone: photo/revision by Rick Emerson; original portrait of Alden Barrett by Doyle Barrett. Poem by Alden Barrett.
Beatrice Sparks, 1977: courtesy of *Daily Herald*
Sparks *VOICES* headshot: courtesy of Ralph S. Burton
Jay's Journal copyright application/*Go Ask Alice* copyright application: courtesy of Library of Congress, Copyright Office
Go Ask Alice catalog entry: courtesy of Library of Congress online catalog, 2021

Sparks house/Beatrice Sparks with bookcase/Beatrice Sparks with Alleen Pace Nilsen: photos by (and courtesy of) Nicolette Wickman. Photos first appeared in *School Library Journal*, October 1979

"Tina" letter: photo by Rick Emerson; document courtesy of the L. Tom Perry Special Collections Department, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University

Youth Academy ID card/Youth Academy diploma: courtesy of Tobi Hudson and Brigham Young University

Barrett sign: photo by Rick Emerson

Rick Emerson Contract Excerpt: courtesy of BenBella Books

About the Author

Rick Emerson is a longtime radio and television broadcaster, the former host of the nationally syndicated *Rick Emerson Show*, and the coauthor (with Lisa Desjardins) of *Zombie Economics: A Guide to Personal Finance*. He's a regular guest on America's finer podcasts, and can be seen in occasional television roles as well as in several independent films and a truly dreadful commercial for tires. He lives in Portland, Oregon, with his two dogs, Willard and Philo.