

In the Night Room

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About 9:45 on a Wednesday morning early in a rain-drenched September, a novelist named Timothy Underhill gave up, in more distress than he cared to acknowledge, on his ruined breakfast and the *New York Times* crossword puzzle and returned, far behind schedule, to his third-floor loft at 55 Grand Street. Closing his door behind him did nothing to calm his troubled heart. He clanked his streaming umbrella into an upright metal stand, transported a fresh cup of decaffeinated coffee to his desk, parked himself in a flexible mesh chair bristling with controls, double-clicked on Outlook Express's arrow-swathed envelope, and, with the sense of finally putting most of his problem behind him, called to the surface of his screen the day's first catch of e-mails, ten in all. Two of them were completely inexplicable. Because the messages seemed to come from strangers (with names unattached to specific domains, he would notice later), bore empty subject lines, and consisted of no more than a couple of disconnected words each, he promptly deleted them.

As soon as he had done so, he remembered dumping a couple of similar e-mails two days earlier. For a moment, what he had seen from the sidewalk outside the Fireside Diner flared again before him, wrapped in every bit of its old urgency and dread.

In a sudden shaft of brightness that fell some twenty miles north-west of Grand Street, a woman named Willy Bryce Patrick (soon to be Faber) was turning her slightly dinged little Mercedes away from the Pathmark store on the north side of Hendersonia, having succumbed to the compulsion, not that she had much choice, to drive two and two-tenths miles along Union Street's increasingly vacant blocks instead of proceeding directly home. When she reached a vast parking lot with two sedans trickling through its exit, she checked her rearview mirror and looked around before driving in. Irregular slicks of water gleamed on the black surface of the lot. The men waiting to drive out of the lot took in the blond, shaggy-haired woman moving through their field of vision at the wheel of a sleek, snub-nosed car; one of them thought he was looking at a teenaged boy.

Willy drifted along past the penitentiary-like building that dominated the far end of the parking lot. Her shoulders rode high and tight, and her upper arms seemed taut as cords. Like all serious compulsions, hers seemed both a necessary part of her character and to have been wished upon her by some indifferent deity. Willy pulled in to an empty space and, now at the heart of her problem, regarded what was before her: a long, shabby-looking brick structure, three stories high, with wide metal doors and ranks of filthy

windows concealed behind cobwebs of mesh. Around the back, she knew, the dock that led into the loading bays protruded outward, like a pier over the surface of a lake. A row of grimy letters over the topmost row of windows spelled out MICHIGAN PRODUCE.

Somehow, that had been the start of her difficulties: MICHIGAN PRODUCE, the words, not the building, which appeared to be a wholesale fruit-and-vegetable warehouse. Two days earlier, driving along inattentively, in fact in one of her “dazes,” her “trances”—Mitchell Faber’s words—Willy had found herself here, on this desolate section of Union Street, and the two words atop the big grimy structure had all but peeled themselves off the warehouse, set themselves on fire, and floated aflame toward her through the slate-colored air.

Willy had the feeling that she had been led here, that her “trance” had been charged with purpose, and that she had been all along *meant* to come across this building.

She wondered if this kind of thing ever happened to someone else. Almost instantly, Willy dismissed the strange little vision that blazed abruptly in her mind, of a beautiful, dark-haired teenaged boy, skateboard in one hand, standing dumbstruck on a sunlit street before an empty, ordinary-looking building. Her imagination had always been far too willing to leap into service, whether or not at the time imagination was actually useful. That sometimes it had been supremely useful to Willy did not diminish her awareness that her imaginative faculty could also turn on her, savagely. Oh, yes. You never knew which was the case, either, until the dread began to crawl up your arms.

The image of a teenaged boy and an empty house added to the sum of disorder at large in the universe, and she sent it back to the mysterious realm from which it had emerged. Because: hey, what might *be* in that empty house?

The memory of the messages he had seen on Monday awakened Tim Underhill's curiosity, and before going on to answer the few of the day's e-mails that required responses, he clicked on **Deleted Items**, of which he seemed now to have accumulated in excess of two thousand, and looked for the ones that matched those he had just received. There they were, together in the order in which he had deleted them: Huffy and presten, with the blank subject lines that indicated a kind of indifference to protocol he wished he did not find mildly annoying. He clicked on the first message.

From: Huffy

To: tunderhill@nyc.rr.com

Sent: Monday, September 1, 2003 8:52 AM

Subject:

re member

That was the opposite of dis member, Tim supposed, and dis member was the guy standing next to dat member. He tried the second one.

From: presten
To: tunderhill@nyc.rr.com
Sent: Monday, September 1, 2003 9:01 AM
Subject:

no helo

Useless, meaningless, a nuisance. Huffy and presten were kids who had figured out how to hide their e-mail addresses. Presumably they had learned his from the website mentioned on the jacket of his latest book. He looked again at the two e-mails he had just dumped.

From: rudderless
To: tunderhill@nyc.rr.com
Sent: Wednesday, September 3, 2003 6:32 AM
Subject:

no time

and

From: loumay
To: tunderhill@nyc.rr.com
Sent: Wednesday, September 3, 2003 6:41 AM
Subject:

there wuz

There wuz, wuz there? All of these enigmatic messages sounded as though their perpetrators were half asleep, or as though their hands had been snatched off the keyboard—maybe by the next customer at some Internet café, since the second messages came only minutes after the first ones.

What were the odds that four people savvy enough to delete the second half of their e-mail addresses would decide, more or less simultaneously, to send early-morning gibberish to the same person? And how much steeper were the odds against one of them writing “no helo,” whatever that meant, and another deciding, with no prior agreement, upon the echo-phrase “no time”? Although he thought such a coincidence was impossible, he still felt mildly uneasy as he rejected it.

Because that left only two options, and both raised the ante. Either the four people who’d sent the e-mails to him were acting together in conspiracy, or the e-mails had all been sent by the same person using four names.

The names, Huffy, presten, rudderless, loumay, suggested no pattern. They were not familiar. A moment later, Tim remembered that back in his hometown, Millhaven, Illinois, a boy named Paul Resten had been his teammate on the Holy Sepulchre football team. Paulie Resten had been a chaotic little fireplug with greasy hair, a shoplifting problem, and a tendency toward violence. It seemed profoundly unlikely that after a silence of forty-odd years Paulie would send him a two-word e-mail.

Tim read the messages over again, thought for a second, then rearranged them:

re member
there wuz
no helo
no time

which could just as easily have been

re member
there wuz
no time
no helo

or

there wuz
no time
no helo
re member

Not much of an advance, was it? The possibility that “helo” could be a typo for “help” came to mind. *Remember, there was no time, no help.* Whatever the hell that was about, it was pretty depressing. Also depressing was the notion that four people had decided to send him that disjointed message. If Tim felt like getting depressed, he had merely to think of his brother, Philip, who, not much more than one year after his wife’s suicide and the disappearance of his son, had announced his impending marriage to one China Beech, a born-again Christian whom Philip had met shortly after her emergence from the chrysalis of an exotic dancer. On the whole, Tim decided, he’d rather think about the inexplicable e-mails.

They had the stale, slightly staid aura of a Sherlock Holmes setup. Faintly, the rusty machinery of a hundred old detective novels could be heard, grinding into what passed for life. Nonetheless, in the twenty-first century any such thing had to be seen as a possible threat. At the very least, a malign hacker could have compromised the security of his system.

When his antivirus program discovered no loathsome substance hidden within his folders and files, Tim procrastinated a little further by calling his computer guru, Myron Dorot-Rivage. Myron looked like a Spaniard, and he spoke with a surprisingly musical German accent. He had rescued Tim and his companions at 55 Grand from multiple catastrophes.

Amazingly, Myron answered his phone on the second ring. “So, Tim,” he said, being equipped with infallible caller ID as well as a headset, “tell me your problem. I am booked solid for *at least* the next three days, but perhaps we can solve it over the phone.”

“It isn’t exactly a computer problem.”

“You are calling me about a *personal* problem, Tim?”

Momentarily, Tim considered telling his computer guru about what had happened that morning on West Broadway. Myron would have no sympathy for any problem that involved a ghost. He said, “I’ve been getting weird e-mails,” and described the four messages. “My virus check came up clean, but I’m still a little worried.”

“You probably won’t get a virus unless you open an attachment. Are you bothered by the anonymity?”

“Well, yeah. How do they do that, leave out their addresses? Is that legal?”

“Legal schmegal. I could arrange the same thing for you, if you were willing to pay for it. But what I *cannot* do is trace such an e-mail back to its source. These people pay their fees for a reason, after all!”

Myron drew in his breath, and Tim heard the clatter of metal against metal. It was like talking to an obstetrician who was delivering a baby.

After hanging up, Tim noticed that three new e-mails had arrived since his last look at his in-box. The first, *Monster Oral Sex Week*, undoubtedly offered seven days’ free access to a porn site; the second, *300,000 Customers*, almost certainly linked to an e-mail database; the third, *nayrm*, made the skin on his forearms prickle. The *Sex* and the *Customers* disappeared unopened into the landfill of deleted mail. As he had dreaded, *nayrm* proved, when clicked upon, to have arrived without the benefit of a filled-in subject line or identifiable e-mail address. It had been sent at 10:58 A.M. and consisted of three words:

hard death hard