

CHAPTER ONE CARRIED AWAY FROM OLD VIRGINNY

Dear Waldo,

I regret to inform you that I am leaving. This may come as a shock to you, but such things are inevitable byproducts of our confused little world. Do not doubt I would resist this, were it in my power to do so. There are, unfortunately, many circumstances beyond my control. Please be advised to disassociate yourself from my beliefs; find your own, less dangerous road to true knowledge. As far as those who are misguided enough to care are concerned, I am disappearing forever. I dare not say any more, even this may be too much. Perhaps we will meet again in a better place, with only the good and righteous allowed to inhabit it. You surely must be aware there are no such restrictions here. I always hated goodbyes, Waldo, and I would have preferred almost any kind imaginable to this one - I'm truly sorry. Remember me fondly and please be careful. I'll always love you.

Old Hoss

Waldo Billingsly stared at the note in his hands. What did it mean? How could his grandfather-his hero-the man who'd raised him since that other bleak and terrible day, leave in such a sudden unexpected fashion?

When Waldo had opened his eyes just a short time earlier, he immediately sensed something was wrong. Although the June day was warm and delightful with the birds singing merrily outside his bedroom window, the emotional 28 year old had awakened with an air of impending doom.

He'd been dreaming about Ambrose Bierce, and had felt, as all people do from time to time, the dream held some significance. His grandfather loved the writings of Bierce and was obsessed with the author's unexplained disappearance. Waldo knew Bierce had also been keenly interested in strange disappearances before he vanished himself. The irony had always fascinated Old Hoss, and Waldo shook his head in wonder at how magnified it became with his grandfather's own abrupt departure. Was it possible, he wondered, for an individual, as a result of an abnormal interest in the subject, to cause his own disappearance? Or, as Charles Fort playfully suggested, in one of his many outrageous musings on the subject, could it be that some humans are simply fated to vanish inexplicably? Fort had been the foremost iconoclast of the century, perhaps of all time, and Waldo was familiar with every unsubtle nuance of his outlandish theories, as his books on unexplained phenomena held a treasured place in his grandfather's voluminous library.

The old man was an early riser, and when Waldo had stumbled into the kitchen just after noon to find no empty cereal bowl with traces of granola in it awaiting him on the table, and no extremist broadcast blaring out of the short wave radio set in the living room, he really began to panic. He conducted a quick, superficial check of the entire house, his timid nature flinching at every

turn in fear of discovering his grandfather's body, but it proved to be about as productive as the frantic dragnets set by bumbling, nineteenth century London bobbies for the elusive Jack The Ripper. Visions of little green men in flying saucers, noiselessly whisking his grandfather away to another world as he slept in the room across the hall, danced in Waldo's head as he read the contents of Old Hoss's farewell note over and over again. Finally, he threw the piece of paper down in frustration and ran his fingers through his long brown hair. Weary of speculating, he felt tears welling up in his green eyes.

The man whose apparent loss Waldo mourned so deeply was a truly unique individual. Abner Billingsly was a dynamic, original thinker possessing uncommon insight into the human experience. Waldo's grandfather had witnessed over three quarters of the twentieth century unfold before him, but in spite of his 81 years, his tall, sturdy frame was still vigorous, in large measure due to lengthy daily walks and a strict vegetarian diet he'd instituted well before it was in vogue. Even considering his robust constitution, however, it was difficult to imagine the elderly eccentric embarking upon any spontaneous journeys. He had never learned to drive, and although he enjoyed traveling all over the world during much of his life, for the past several years he'd confined himself within the Virginia, Maryland, and Washington, D.C. borders.

The old man's nonconformity was evident by his vow, which he'd honored since the days of the Great Depression, to never tuck his shirt tail in. He wore his gray hair long, and sported a thick beard on his open and friendly face. His looks were only slightly marred by a large, bulbous nose, which reddened easily from the strain of his hearty laugh and booming voice. As a child, raised on a farm in Warrenton, Virginia, Waldo's grandfather had been driven by a burning desire to become a major league baseball player. This dream was nurtured by numerous trips into Washington, D.C. with his father to see the Senators play. The awestruck youngster's father regaled him with tales of the old-timers who'd played in the 1880's and 1890's, and Waldo's grandfather took a particular delight in hearing of the exploits of one Old Hoss Radbourne, a legendary pitcher of that era. This interest in Radbourne led to his playmates christening him with the same nickname, and it stuck throughout his life. A dose of scarlet fever at the age of fourteen had weakened Old Hoss Billingsly considerably, and shattered his dreams of playing major league baseball. Four years later, Waldo's grandfather received a stroke of good fortune when his uncle, the notorious Mad Millard Billingsly, a very rich and marginally sane character, left a sizable inheritance to him. Shrewd maneuvering in the stock market, combined with a great deal of luck, left Old Hoss a millionaire at the age of 21.

Waldo's grandfather began creatively writing at this point, and fell in love with a fellow fledgling novelist during a trip to New York. Old Hoss never elaborated about the true love of his life, beyond the fact that she was incredibly beautiful and talented, and her name was Cora. Upon reading her completed novel, Old Hoss was so impressed that he lent his considerable financial

support in an effort to find a publisher. Waldo's grandfather was able, through his influence, to arrange a meeting with a renowned publishing firm, and Cora's manuscript was well received and considered for publication. The following day Waldo's grandfather discovered Cora's brutally murdered body in her apartment. Her assailant was never apprehended, and Old Hoss, torn by grief, left New York City after the funeral, never to return again. He also vowed, at this time, to forego any future effort at publishing his own writings, which began to grow at an astonishing rate. The creative urge was gone, however, and he carved instead his own niche in the literary field by producing a steady stream of small pamphlets on unexplained phenomena, bizarre historical and political theories, and other matters unacceptable in polite society. Eventually, Old Hoss married pretty Barbara Jackson, twelve years his junior, but tragedy struck again when she died giving birth to their first child, a healthy baby girl. Old Hoss's only child was later killed, along with her husband, distant cousin John Billingsly, in a plane crash. Barbara's son, ten year old Waldo, moved in with his grandfather, who raised him in his kind, inimitable fashion. Old Hoss's attempts at indoctrinating Waldo into his curious methods of observation and reasoning were, not surprisingly, a smashing success. Waldo grew to share his grandfather's penchant for the odd and controversial, and began checking the bushes and glancing over his in a word, that there was a group somewhere orchestrating all, in an evil, secretive manner, capable of repelling all efforts to stop them. Some of the colorful titles of Old Hoss's unpublished pamphlets illustrate the fringes he patrolled quite vividly: *Are There Holes Instead of Poles?*, *An Agnostic Looks at Jewish Bankers*, *Baseball Died When the Dead Ball Did*, *O'Come All Ye Traitors*, *Orgone Energy and Secret Meditation Rooms*, *Fantastic Friends of the Founding Fathers*.

Waldo went into the bathroom and blew his nose, a compulsive habit he'd inherited from his grandfather. He brushed his long, unmanageable hair repeatedly, put down the brush at last, and sighed when it fell back into the same disheveled position.

Waldo was of average height, with an abnormally large chest that contrasted sharply with the rest of his slight frame. His finely chiseled, handsome features often went unnoticed, due to a general disregard for his appearance, and a lack of self confidence that caused him to bow his head around strangers and adopt an unattractive, stooping posture. The nervous, immature young man was the last person anyone would choose to find them, if they happened to become lost or displaced, and yet he was solely responsible for locating Old Hoss. There were no other close relatives, and his grandfather's few surviving friends were unlikely to be of much assistance. One was in a mental institution, where he'd been for a number of years, and Waldo wasn't even certain he was still alive. The other was an ex-college professor, who shared many of the same interests his grandfather did, and was thought to be mentally unstable himself.

Waldo realized, since he'd been left a note indicating that his grandfather was indeed missing, voluntarily or not, that the most logical course of action at this point was to notify the police. This

presented a problem, however. Waldo, like his grandfather, detested the police and cherished the notion that their main function was to inconvenience, intimidate, and incarcerate law-abiding citizens. In spite of this firm belief, Waldo, shaking his head and second-guessing himself as he dialed the number, decided to phone the police department.

The brief conversation that ensued did nothing to change his opinion. After being informed that the missing person was of legal age, the police spokesperson curtly cut matters short by stating, "in that case, there's really nothing we can do." Waldo felt almost vindicated by this nonresponsiveness, and was starting to weigh his other options when someone knocked at the back door.

Waldo, who was in the kitchen, ran down the stairs leading to the sprawling colonial's finished basement. Old Hoss used the massive lower level of his home to pursue his investigations into those uncharted areas of inquiry he held so dear. There was a fully equipped laboratory, although the old man had never been capable of conducting an experiment in the strictest scientific sense; a vast room sectioned off which served as the main library, housing an unparalleled array of unpublicized and ignored books, magazines, and newspapers, as well as a large number of his own unpublished pamphlets; a photographic darkroom; a small projection area for private viewing of the few films Waldo's grandfather deemed worthwhile; and Old Hoss's vaunted "study", which contained the rest of his unpublished pamphlets, his 18th century writing desk, and the typewriter he'd purchased in 1930 and been too superstitious to replace.

Waldo unlocked the door and opened it to find, much as he'd expected, Professor Hiram Buckley, the aforementioned ex-history teacher, standing there. Of their infrequent visitors, only the Professor ever used this entrance.

"Ah, Waldo!" Buckley exclaimed. "May I-that is-is your grandfather in?"

Professor Hiram Buckley was always a spectacle to behold. He was a thin man in his late fifties with only wisps of hair on his rather pointed head, and a jet black goatee that should have made him appear sinister but somehow didn't. He wore thick glasses, without which he was legally blind, and his wardrobe, which never varied, consisted of a bright green and orange-checked jacket, a yellow relic of a necktie, dating back prior to the yuppie power era, black and gray striped pants, and well-worn brown boots, which always seemed caked with mud. The professor looked the part of one obsessed with such things as U.F.O.'s, werewolves, the secrets of ancient cultures, and missing Kennedy assassination witnesses.

"Uh...well, no he isn't, actually." Waldo replied.

"Oh, is he-that is-when will he back?"

Waldo sighed and indicated that Professor Buckley should come inside. He proceeded to relate to the Professor the fact that his grandfather had disappeared, leaving only an enigmatic note

behind; that he'd contacted the police, who were of no assistance, and that he was confused and would be grateful for any suggestions in the matter.

The Professor tugged at his yellow tie, one of his numerous quirks, and frowned. "Oh dear, what can be-that is-have you thought about where he might have gone?"

"Yes." Waldo responded wearily. "But the note seemed to indicate he wasn't going...."

"Excuse me...." The Professor interrupted. "But may I see the note?"

"Sure. It's upstairs." Waldo started walking towards the steps. "Come on, I'll fix you a drink."

The two of them found themselves in the kitchen a few moments later, and Waldo turned towards Buckley with a smile.

"The usual, Professor?"

Hiram Buckley grinned broadly, as well. "Ah, yes-that is-if it's not too much trouble, my boy."

"Of course not." Waldo answered, and mixed the Professor's standard Tom Collins, heavy on the lemon, light on the lime. Handing it to the grateful gentleman, he led the way into the living room.

"I say-that is-you don't think this is too early for"

"Not at all, Professor." Waldo knew before Buckley finished that he was, as usual, seeking reassurance that his drinking alcohol during the morning hours was a proper, acceptable form of behavior. The Professor was no alcoholic, yet he did enjoy the taste of liquor, and would most often partake of it at odd times, such as weekday mornings, while not imbibing at all during what are considered conventional partying hours. Saturday nights, for instance, were more likely to find Hiram Buckley at home immersed in the writings of H.P. Lovecraft or Ezra Pound than tipping his elbow in a bar.

Waldo sat down on the sofa and picked up the note, which was lying on the coffee table. "Here it is," he said, handing it to Buckley.

The Professor scanned it with a furrowed brow, expending many "hmmms" in the process. He laid the note down, at length, and daintily took a sip of his drink.

"Waldo," he spoke with an air of authority, "I will-that is-I love your grandfather. Please let me help you find him."

Waldo nodded in appreciation. "That's very kind of you, Professor. But, I don't know where to begin looking. Do you have any ideas?"

"Hmmm. Let me see the note again." Professor Buckley took the piece of paper and turned it over and over again in his hands, as if he were receiving some kind of psychic vibrations by doing so.

"The best-that is-the most likely place to begin searching is"

He began tugging furiously at his tie again.

"How about the museums? You know how Old Hoss loved them."

Waldo attempted to discard this idea politely, gently pointing out that the Smithsonian museums consisted of many buildings, and besides, the note seemed to indicate he was being abducted in some fashion. "You see, Professor Buckley, I really don't know much about his social life, other than he didn't seem to have much of one. Do you know?"

"Waldo, my boy," The Professor interrupted again, "the suburbs of northern Virginia are crowded with quiet corners where the unsuspecting can be hidden, and the unforeseen can occur. Despite our reputation for being a congested metropolitan area, there are places where one can wander to, on their own or otherwise, and never be heard from again."

Waldo groaned and hung his head.

The Professor realized how indelicate he must have sounded and moved next to Waldo on the couch, placing his arm around the young man's shoulder.

"Waldo, I'm very sorry. I was-that is-I didn't mean to sound so gruesome." Buckley's face suddenly brightened. "Is it possible-that is-he was quite a drinker when he wanted to be, Waldo, and he might very well be in one of his favorite watering-holes right now, in such a condition that he cannot return home."

Waldo shrugged. "I guess that's as good a place as any to start."

"That's the spirit, boy." The Professor patted him on the back and stood up. "I suggest we begin in Old Towne, Alexandria. He loved that section."

With that, Waldo and the Professor left the house and drove off in the latter's van, which was painted in a bright array of colors that meshed nicely with its sartorially splendid owner.

They searched every bar in Old Towne, as well as all the used bookstores, but Old Hoss was nowhere to be found. Eventually, tired and discouraged, Waldo and Hiram Buckley drove back to Annandale, where the Billingsly house was located. Waldo invited the Professor in and, as both of them were terribly hungry, they ordered a pizza.

While they were waiting for their dinner to be delivered, the Professor picked up a frayed, black briefcase, which he'd brought in from the van. Opening it, he held aloft several sheets of paper, which were actually copies of the obscure little newsletter he published, called *Force Of Habit*.

"Waldo....do you mind?" The Professor asked.

Hiram Buckley had once been a history professor at a local community college, whose transformation into a dapper, offbeat, and mostly unemployed philosopher had been abrupt.

According to the tale he often told, which he invariably began with the lamenting line "ah, if only I'd never read *None Dare Call It Conspiracy*....,"

He considered himself a sort of esoteric martyr, who'd sacrificed everything for principle. Apparently that little book had set him on a course towards political extremism, culminating in the loss of his job at the community college, as well as the breakup of his previously stable marriage. By the time he met Old Hoss, a few years later, Hiram Buckley was one of those unfortunates the normal and untroubled point at in scorn and laugh at derisively; a veritable dog that's kicked while it's down. He was, under such circumstances, a perfect companion for Abner "Old Hoss" Billingsly, one of the few people who didn't consider him a prime candidate for St. Elizabeth's, the infamous mental hospital located in the District of Columbia. Since his career in education had been so rudely interrupted, the Professor had worked his way through a series of menial, low paying jobs, which he inevitably lost due to his proclivity for preaching unwelcome and unpopular political ideas to his fellow employees. He managed somehow to eke out, through the meager wages he earned from his various, short term positions, enough of a living to maintain a small efficiency apartment in nearby Falls Church. His small publication, which he'd been producing for many years, had a very limited circulation, but Waldo had always enjoyed reading the copies of *Force Of Habit* mailed to his grandfather, who was, of course, a faithful subscriber. The most popular part of the newsletter, if any part of a publication that is read by such small numbers of people can be referred to as such, was the "Letters To H.B." section, wherein loyal readers tested the wisdom of Professor Buckley. They also pontificated on various topics to such an extent that it was considered likely by all, including Waldo and Old Hoss, that the letters were written by Hiram Buckley himself. The Professor invariably managed to read a few of the letters aloud, during each of his visits, and Old Hoss was the perfect sounding board, providing the kind of positive reinforcement that Buckley and most of the rest of humanity seek but often starve for. Waldo normally enjoyed these performances, as the Professor would read them with great fervor, and they were often amusing and thought provoking, but with his mind full of horrible images of his grandfather's possible fate, he was merely able to lamely nod his assent to the Professor.

Hiram Buckley looked somewhat disappointed at Waldo's obvious lack of enthusiasm, but rallied quickly and picked one of his favorite selections from the October 1979 issue.

"If I may begin...."

Waldo smiled. "Please go ahead, Professor."

"Thank you." The Professor started reading:

Dear H.B.,

I have seen the term "fredneck" mentioned in your newsletter several times. Please explain what it means.

Former Flapper in Flushing

Dear Former:

A fredneck is an entity combining the worst characteristics of the freak and the redneck. The fact that they have not been officially recognized comes as distressing news to those segments of the population, which, while perhaps not affixing a colorful label on them, have become painfully aware of their less than charming presence. The whole fredneck phenomenon most probably began with the Hell's Angel and similar types of localized motorcycle gangs that flourished in the 1960's. Marlon Brando, James Dean, and Elvis Presley laid the groundwork for this in the 1950's, establishing the kind of persona, which would develop into the full-fledged fredneck a decade later. In those early, innocent years, it was merely necessary to present the vaguely dangerous world of the Brando and Dean types as being sexy and desirable. I would venture to guess that more bad marriages were caused as a result of young girls absorbing that lesson in 1950's movie theaters, than by all the combined efforts of unqualified secretaries and friendly neighborhood milkmen. A message was sent out loud and clear to American women: it was not "cool" to be attracted to a nice, polite young man. It was better, instead, to risk everything to obtain the reckless, often unattractive ne'er do well. By the time motorcycle gangs started forming in the 1960's, the true fredneck was born with them. Then, as now, the fredneck specialized in violent behavior, usually chemically enhanced, administering liberal doses of verbal and physical abuse in their patented obnoxious fashion. Fittingly, today's frednecks carry on the traditional staples of their able predecessors: general uncleanness, a totally incomprehensible line of reasoning, and surprisingly attractive female companions, riding astride the backs of their most trusted means of transportation. Predictably enough, they continue to enjoy great luck in their few encounters with the law, whose long arm never seems to apprehend them when they are participating in their favorite destructive pastimes. The fredneck is one of the great scourges of society, on a par with the inner city gang member and nearly as dangerous as the local Congressional representative.

Waldo expressed his approval, though not as demonstratively as he might have at other times.

"Thank you, my boy." The Professor beamed proudly. "Would you like me to read another one?"

Waldo didn't have a chance to respond to this, as their pizza arrived at that moment, and the scent of the sausage and pepperoni, combined with the fact they hadn't eaten all day, compelled them to forget everything else. Discarding his cherished briefcase, the Professor, who insisted on paying, tossed a large bill at the happy deliveryman, and they sat down and devoured their dinner.

Professor Buckley offered to stay the night, but Waldo finally persuaded him to leave, reassuring him repeatedly that he would be called back promptly should that become necessary. It was after 11:30 when the Professor departed, and the exhausted young man immediately lay down on the sofa and lit up a cigarette.

Waldo inhaled deeply, staring at the ceiling. It was at times like this that he was at his worst. His mind, while indecisive, was also capable of producing the most detailed, fantastic daydreams imaginable, and with the mysterious disappearance of his grandfather as fodder, his speculations grew even more intense and far-fetched than usual. On the other hand, the logical part of his brain, underdeveloped as it was, went almost entirely untapped in such a situation. Waldo was literally frozen into inaction by his chemical makeup, and this was apparent in the number of cigarettes he lit, the number of sighs he expelled, and the number of times his helpless fingers alternated between nervously tapping the coffee table and running through his unkempt hair.

All that night, Waldo remained awake, deep in unproductive thought, routinely walking back and forth from the living room to the front porch, where he would take a seat in the old-fashioned swing and smoke heavily. The blissful suburban setting, especially on spring nights like this, when the crickets chirped so lustily, and the porch swing creaked so reassuringly in the warm breeze, was perfect for conjuring up bold new fantasies.

Professor Buckley arrived early the next morning, and the two of them spent several hours scouring other unusual nooks and crannies of northern Virginia. They checked more of the smaller, atmospheric bars, the ones which opened at sunrise and catered to a few loyal, unconventional customers; they checked more used book stores; they checked Catholic churches and rectories, which the doubting oldtimer would sometimes wander into and debate the priests; they even gathered up the courage to enter the country's murder capital, Washington, D.C., to check some of the quaint little parks that dot its environs, as Old Hoss was known, on rare occasions, to take a bus into the city and wind up sitting like a tourist, admiring the wonderful statues in them. They looked, in all reality, about as thoroughly as one could look for someone who held very few acquaintances and seldom ventured out of doors.

As the Professor sat in an easy chair in the living room, sipping another Tom Collins and speculating about who and what Old Hoss might have encountered during his daily brisk walks about the neighborhood, Waldo, not having slept at all during the night, began to nod off.

"My boy, although I've never owned a flag, I feel as though my heart was at half-mast." As the one time pride of the local community college began an impromptu eulogy for an individual who may not have needed one, he suddenly noticed his young companion's drooping eyelids. "I say, Waldo-that is-are you sleepy?"

Waldo opened his eyes. "Huh? Oh.... yes, I must be...."

The Professor stood up. "Forgive me, Waldo. I should really be more observant. I'm going now, but please phone me later." He downed his drink and straightened his bright yellow tie. "Now you sleep, my boy- you need your rest."

"Thank you, Professor, I will." Waldo wearily replied, closing the door closed behind the eccentric ex-history teacher.

Walking into the kitchen, Waldo poured himself a coke and lit up a cigarette. His thoughts turned back to his missing grandfather. How could he find him? Where else could he look? Was it possible his grandfather had kept some part of his life hidden from him? The questions kept coming as he blew smoke rings in the direction of the refrigerator. If there was indeed a grim reality to face, and a corpse to be found, Waldo knew that in some cases the bodies remained undiscovered for a long time. The nervous young man shivered at this, and at the even more frightening fate accorded those rare missing persons who were *never* located. As he watched the smoke rings dissolve, Waldo realized he had to do *something*, and do it quickly. The more time elapsed, the more likely it was that his grandfather would become mere fodder for speculation, like Amelia Earhart, or even Ambrose Bierce.

Waldo gazed at the old man's room. To borrow a phrase from the Warren Commission, it was a "monument to clutter." There were books and papers strewn haphazardly on the bed, the dresser drawers, the night stand, and all over the floor. The decor resembled an esoteric precipitation, like the strange showers of frogs and fish described in the books of Charles Fort. Impressive cobwebs hung from every corner and the walls were filled with posters of non-academy award winning movies. The large walk-in closet was overflowing with Old Hoss's massive comic book collection which, had more care been shown it, would have been worth a small fortune. Stepping carefully, Waldo made his way to an old wooden chair, picked up a thick volume which was lying there conspicuously, brushed some papers aside and sat down.

The book he held was merely a thick stack of notebook paper, loosely bound together with string. Written on the cover page was *The Journal of Sam Hancock*. Waldo frowned. What was Old

Hoss doing with Sam Hancock's Journal? Being high-strung and far from level-headed, Waldo had waited an inordinately long time to thoroughly comb his grandfather's bedroom.

Could his belated discovery of a seemingly innocuous private diary actually be of significance?

Waldo remembered Sam Hancock quite well, even though he hadn't seen him for nearly twenty years. Hancock, a year younger than Old Hoss, had been Waldo's grandfather's best friend from the moment they first met as spectators at the Army-McCarthy hearings in the 1950's. As a youth, Waldo had often been left with various nannies during the times Old Hoss and Hancock journeyed about the globe quenching their mutual thirst for knowledge of the world's most bizarre mysteries. Of course, Waldo's grandfather was so loving and attentive when he was at home, that the youngster was able to handle the not infrequent separations better than he might have otherwise. Waldo had genuinely liked Sam Hancock, and he recalled with fondness how the old man would muss his hair and tell him that if he had been lucky enough to have children he would have wanted them to be just like Waldo. Waldo had, in fact, felt rather sorry for him, as he seemed to have no one that cared about him other than Old Hoss.

Sam Hancock had been a short and stocky man, with slick, dark brown hair, who always appeared much younger than he was. He was blessed with extraordinary health, and was responsible for influencing Old Hoss to adopt a vegetarian diet. Although Waldo's grandfather was the closest friend he ever had, much of Sam Hancock's past remained hidden even from him. His apparent financial independence was derived from some unknown source, in that he was never known to have held a job. After meeting and forming a fast friendship, Old Hoss and Hancock, in addition to traveling together on numerous occasions, founded T.O.T.E.N.O. (The Organization To End National Organizations). They were the only members. Working closely together over the years, their research into certain unexplored areas yielded two books: *Untold Stories From American History* and *Bizarre Events and Vanishing Virtues*. Naturally, no effort was made to publish either one. In 1969, Hancock inexplicably and without warning fired his recently purchased shotgun into his television screen, then ran outside, shooting wildly at passing motorists. Firing and re-loading until his ammunition was gone, Hancock collapsed on the front porch steps of his Annandale, Virginia home and stared blankly into space until the police arrived and took him away. Fortunately, Hancock had never fired a gun before and thus was a poor shot, so no one was injured during his outburst. Old Hoss's best friend was declared insane and sent to The Last Chance Relaxation Home in Cornoil, Iowa. Hancock refused to comment on his actions, to Old Hoss or the authorities, and at last report was entering his nineteenth year of absolute silence in The Extremely Unreachable Ward of the Iowa mental institution.

When the incident occurred, and suddenly Sam Hancock stopped coming around, Waldo, not unnaturally, questioned his absence. Old Hoss explained that Mr. Hancock was very sick, that he'd been transported to an asylum in far away Iowa, and that it was unclear when he would be better. Waldo was hardly satisfied with this explanation, and was rather frightened by the name of the ominous sounding ward he'd been placed in, but eventually, as a budding teen with hormones to respond to, he ceased wondering what had happened to Sam Hancock. Actually, until he'd found the book he now held in his hands, Waldo hadn't thought of Sam Hancock for many, many years. He turned the pages of the journal and randomly stopped to read an entry:

The Journal Of Sam Hancock, May 1, 1967

Liberals, especially those who fancy themselves to be scientifically inclined, love to preface anything that can't be explained within the narrow parameters of their push-button belief systems with the inane statement "we don't know." This is usually followed by a long and confusing, but ultimately successful argument proving their total uncertainty.

Today is May Day, their glorious anniversary; and thus I am preoccupied with liberal axioms. There will be no flags lowered today for the untold millions slaughtered by the communists over the last fifty years. No reporter in this "Christian" land will expose the savage murders of priests and nuns in every place the red devils have come to power. But no one wants to spoil their holiday, so I will mumble to myself in a secluded corner.

Our young men continue to fall in Vietnam, led to their graves by the hand of the great conspiracy as surely as they were ushered into the undeclared war by their draft boards. And L.B.J., the "accidental president", stands there like the comic caricature he is. He smiled the same way on Air Force One that day, pleasantly drawling the oath of office as Jackie politely remained devastated in a dress still dripping her husband's blood. But enough about Johnson, he is not alone by any means. This republic is falling fast in every direction; in politics, in culture, in architecture, in sports, in every area of human endeavor America is dying. Athletes and movie stars care nothing for the fans that pay their outrageous salaries. Not that they ever did, of course, but at least in the past they had the propriety to disguise their ingratitude with a show of public politeness, or what Ambrose Bierce termed "the most acceptable form of hypocrisy." Instead of feeling fortunate and at least feigning a degree of graciousness, these pampered laborers at leisure have come to actually believe their scripts.

But now the night grows darker and the drums roll in the distance. Here's the pitch-*swing*...and another thousand vibrant youngsters dead in the jungles, another thousand wide-eyed socialists and campus fanatics patrolling the streets and terrifying the authorities who finance them. But it's all okay because Martin Luther King has a dream, and the Cartwright boys are as near as the next Ponderosa, just beyond the hills, riding slightly behind J. Edgar Hoover and the Untouchables. Sure...and the Great Depression was an accidental occurrence, and the Rockefellers are kindly philanthropists, and U.F.O.'s are spacecraft from another planet, and thousands of slaves toiling over the centuries built the ancient pyramids, and Lee Harvey Oswald killed President Kennedy, and U.F.O.'s are figments of the imagination, and the Soviet government can be trusted, and J.D. Salinger must be interviewed, and someday there will be nuclear war, and the U.S. government can be trusted, and the Washington Senators will win the American League pennant.

This tirade of Hancock's appeared near the end of the journal, and Waldo, his curiosity piqued, continued flipping the pages, stopping to read one of the last entries:

The Journal Of Sam Hancock, August 19, 1968

Gore Vidal is not afraid of death. This surprising information was just relayed to the public on one of those fascinating talk shows. Undoubtedly, Norman Mailer holds the same opinion. Well, isn't it only logical, you might ask, that the best and brightest among us should not fall victim to devil-with-the-pitchfork type fears? Or garden of paradise hopes? Perhaps. But what about a theory so dangerous, so mind boggling, and yes, so irrational, that it must be referred to only as The Viewpoint That Dare Not Speak Its Name?

*"Golden lads and girls all must
As chimney sweepers, come to dust."*

You can read every book ever written in any language at any point in history, and you will not find a hint of it.

"Now I lay me down to sleep...."

You can watch all of the talk shows, pore over transcripts of "Meet The Press", and follow the adventures of Jacques Cousteau, but you won't hear a word about it.

"I pray the Lord my soul to keep...."

You can speak with every person on the face of the earth, even the more imaginative mental patients, and none of them will mention it.

"If I should die before I wake...."

From the moment any of us utter our first goo-goo's and ga-ga's, we are as good as gone. At that precise instant, any possibility that It will ever arise in us is irrevocably crushed. If any proof is needed, consider how immune to strong emotion our society has grown. At your next visit to the local funeral parlor, glance at the mourners, who can more properly be defined as spectators. Notice how they smell, how well-dressed and dignified they are. This is because viewing the dead has become overwhelmingly acceptable as a social function. Yes, even the corpse is part of the festivities, lying there as the guest of honor, laid out in his best clothes, pumped full of chemicals and smeared with make-up as the patrons file by and nurse their long buried consciences with silk handkerchiefs. Their grief is controlled by outside forces; they will be heartbroken for as long as it is socially acceptable. Thus, if the deceased is a spouse or close family member, periods of depression and deep longing for the past (not to exceed sporadic outbursts thereof) may continue for up to a year, although most "normal" persons will be fully recovered in half that time. Society has taken care of everything; those few left among us with passionate, loving hearts would obviously never totally rebound from this horrible, unexplainable phenomenon called death. It has provided for those unfortunate souls, through its all encompassing empathy, by building mental health facilities, where they are always welcome.

Waldo could see, as he continued skimming through the bulky tome, the steady progression, or perhaps regression, of both the journal's content and the author's state of mind. The vast majority of the opening pages consisted of accounts detailing Hancock's numerous trips, most of them with

Old Hoss, to locales connected in some manner to one strange mystery or another. These encapsulated descriptions of his travels gradually diminished in number as the journal wore on, superseded by scathing social and political commentary, until by the closing pages every entry was an increasingly bitter attack on some facet of the modern world.

Waldo eventually reached the last page and was surprised to find a post-it note stuck there. Pulling it off, he trembled as he read, written in his grandfather's distinctive scrawl, the words:

Room Five.

An idea was beginning to form in Waldo's mind, that perhaps Sam Hancock's journal had been left there on purpose, to be easily discovered and, more importantly, sifted through. Could the simple little note, fastened unaccountably to the final page, be a clue from his grandfather? Was it possible that *Room Five* referred to the number of the room Sam Hancock occupied in the Extremely Unreachable Ward at The Last Chance Relaxation Home, and that Old Hoss Billingsly had decided, on the spur of the moment, to visit his old friend in Cornoil, Iowa?