

The Quest For Eternity

By

Craig Waters

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THE QUEST FOR ETERNITY

CRAIG WATERS

THE TRUE STORY OF ONE MAN'S
SEARCH BEYOND THE GRAVE FOR THE
WOMAN HE LOVED



THE QUEST FOR E·T·E·R·N·I·T·Y

WHERE WAS LONA? WAS SHE TRULY DEAD, KILLED IN A BIZARRE ACCIDENT? OR WAS HER SPIRIT STILL HERE, HAUNTING THE LIVING?

Craig Waters refused to believe that Lona was dead or that the love they shared had died as well. Not when her ghostly form appeared to him, and their children, impelling Craig to take an extraordinary journey into the unknown.

With nothing more than a willingness to take that one step beyond, Craig Waters embarked on a formidable quest. He spoke to doctors, consulted psychics, had mediums guide him through astonishing seances, interrogated witnesses and analyzed detailed data. His conclusion was both unscientific — and undeniable: there was life after death.

CRAIG WATERS' JOURNEY INTO TOMORROW IS A REMARKABLE TRUE STORY THAT WILL NOT FAIL TO MOVE YOU.

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## Chapter One

On May 23, 1977, Lona Puskas died.

Lona was thirty years of age, an attractive young woman with long dark hair, a lovely smile, and lively hazel eyes. She was a college student and hoped to become a child psychologist. Her husband, Elek, managed a firm that manufactured parachutes, and both she and he were sports parachutists. She had two daughters by a former marriage.

I was the former marriage.

Lona and I had met in 1965, when we were both students at the University of Texas in El Paso. We had fallen in love, married, and had children. And then Lona had met Elek—it was as simple as that. It was an old story, but new to us. We had handled it with all the awkwardness and fears that went with being young and naive. We were divorced in 1971, and a short while later Lona had remarried. I had waited four years before taking another chance on wedlock.

Having been separated from her for so long, I rarely thought of Lona. I saw her every other weekend, when I flew down from my home in Massachusetts to visit our daughters in New Jersey, but our meetings were brief and cautious. We would discuss the magazine article that I was currently writing or what she was doing in school, but we steered clear of the personal; we were both afraid of oppressive feelings and unresolved problems. Slowly, weekend by weekend, we became near-strangers again. In between visits, my thoughts were of my new wife, Julie, my work as a journalist, and my children, whom I missed a great deal.

But on that particular Monday, on May 23, I had spent much of the day thinking of Lona. I had recently returned from a two-week trip to Mexico; I had traveled from the capital to Veracruz, a lush resort on the coast, to Tuxtepec, a small rural city in the south, and had finally trekked through jungles to Santa Maria Asuncion de Matamoros, a Stone Age Indian village. There, in a small thatched hut with a hard dirt floor, I had taken notes by lantern-light as several Americans underwent LSD therapy at the hands of a Mexican shaman/ psychiatrist. The odyssey had been fascinating and had also proved unexpectedly poignant.

Lona was half-Mexican, and when we were dating, we had spent a lot of time across the border in Juarez; but more important, Lona's spirit was Spanish. As I had driven through Mexico, the soft, somber quality of the children, the dark beauty of the women, the brightness of the colors, the excitement of the music - all of these had reminded me of her. Now that I was home, writing the story of the LSD pilgrimage, my thoughts turned to Lona again.

I spent the entire day in my office - a desk, typewriter, and chair set in one corner of an unfinished basement - alternately crafting paragraphs and addressing questions to her. "What went wrong, Lona?" I wondered. "Why didn't you tell me what you felt? Why didn't we try a little bit harder?" I regretted the fact that our marriage had failed, but at the end of the day was no closer to the reasons, the complex chronology of emotional cause and effect, than I had been at the outset.

Finally the eleven o'clock News was switched off, and Julie came down to coax me away from words and into bed. We were standing in the basement, discussing the story's progress, when the telephone rang upstairs. I winced inside - bad news always seems to arrive at odd hours - but Julie noted, "It's probably your mother." She was probably right. My mother always called after eleven to save on long-distance charges. Julie answered the phone, while I closed up shop for the night.

But it wasn't my mother; and the news wasn't humorous anecdotes about my sisters or my nephews.

This call was the most important of my life. It would take me between its teeth and twist my history in half. In an instant it would change my life's direction and eventually would set me on a search so bizarre that, by comparison, popping LSD would come to seem as tame as sipping Kool-Aid. It would push my nose into the face of death and ask me to consider what, if anything, waited there.

"It's Fred." Julie mouthed the words as I came into the kitchen. I was surprised, but pleased. Fred Phillips was an old friend, a reporter I had worked with at the Courier-Post, a newspaper in South Jersey; he was best man when I married Julie, and now, though we lived three hundred miles apart, still kept in touch occasionally. I was surprised only that he was calling so late, but then realized that he might be taking his cue from my mother. Julie handed the phone to me.

"I hope I didn't interrupt anything interesting - or unnatural - in the basement." It was definitely Fred.

We chatted for a few minutes, but suddenly his voice turned stone-cold serious. "I have to ask you a question," he said. My mind filled in the blanks: Fred had quit his job and wanted to know what the situation was like in Boston. "What was the name of the guy Lona married?" he asked. It wasn't the question I'd expected, but I wasn't caught short; Fred must have run into Elek and wasn't certain whether or not this was Lona's husband.

"Puskas," I said, and spelled out the name as though I was phoning a story in to the Rewrite Department.

"I hate to be the first person to tell you this ..." Fred paused, reluctant to continue. "I don't know if it's the same person," he went on finally, "but Joannie and I were just watching the News, and there was a story about two skydivers being killed in an accident in New Jersey. We think we heard 'Lona Puskas of Rancocas Woods, New Jersey.'"

As soon as I heard her name and Rancocas Woods, I knew that it was my Lona and I knew that she was dead. In skydiving there are two types of accidents. You break an ankle, and nobody cares, or you are killed and get thirty seconds on the eleven o'clock News. The only other reason why Lona's name would have been mentioned on the News was if she was quoted as a source of information, and Fred was too good a newsman to have missed that.

I stood there, surrounded by all the rational and familiar trappings of my home, my heart beating emptily, and began to gasp for air. Julie, who is sensitive to threats of any sort, turned to me, her face a mask of fear. "What's wrong? What's wrong?" she asked.

"Lona may be dead."

"Oh, no!"

I handed the phone to her, wandered into the darkened living room, and fell across the couch. I began to sob into the cushions. In the kitchen, Julie began making other phone calls. She too was a journalist, and her first phone call was to our alma mater, the Courier-Post; the Night City Desk knew about the accident, but did not yet have the names of the victims. Between anguished sobs, I faulted the paper's performance; it had been better when I was there. Finally, after several minutes, the professional instinct - to gather, check, and order facts, to make some sense out of chaos - prevailed over the personal.

I went to the phone and called the police who would be investigating the accident; no sooner had I gotten the police than a telephone operator interrupted with an emergency call. It was my mother, and she was not calling late to save money. Her voice was bleached with pain.

"I have something terrible to tell you about your family," she said.

"Lona is dead," I said.

"Yes."

As simple as that.

Now that we knew for certain that Lona was dead, Julie and I sat down at the kitchen table to make the necessary decisions.

"Our lives will never be the same," she noted; I nodded in agreement. During the three years of our marriage, Julie and I had had our problems, but now we would come together, unite to support each other in this tragedy. We decided that I would fly down to be with my daughters and that she would drive down later.

I realized that I had to call Elek and resented having to do it. I went into the bedroom and dialed Lona's number. As the phone rang at the other end, I suddenly realized that this was almost a repetition of a call I had made before.

In 1969, Lona and I lived in an apartment in Maple Shade, a pleasant suburb just ten minutes away from the Courier. Lona had recently resumed skydiving, after taking it up briefly in college, and spent each weekend at the Ripcord Paracenter, a jump facility in nearby Lumberton. There she had made a new circle of friends, including Elek, who was involved in the center's operation, and Kay Komae, a young Japanese engineer. One Sunday in November, Lona was late ht getting home, and I called the center. Elek answered the phone.

"Is Lona Waters there?" I asked.

"There's been an accident," he said. His voice was as even, as devoid of emotion, as a robot's. "Lona's gone to the hospital."

I could barely breathe, but asked the essential question. "Has Lona been hurt?"

"No," he told me. "She just went along to help out."

Late that evening, as our two young daughters slept in their bedrooms upstairs, Lona and I sat at our kitchen table, and she told me what had happened. Kay and a second jumper had left the plane at 7,000 feet. At 3,000, the other jumper had opened his chute, but Kay, who was still in free fall, had collided with him and then had fallen to the ground. Kay had died instantaneously of a massive skull fracture. The other jumper had suffered internal injuries and had succumbed two hours later. Lona had gone to the hospital with Kay's new bride.

Now there had been another double fatality at Ripcord, and now I was calling Elek again. This time, though, I knew the terrible answer. The voice that answered the phone was still even and under control, but now it was weary with grief.

"This is Craig," I said. "How are the girls?"

"They're fine. They're sleeping," he told me.

"Are they in bed or sleeping?" The ordeal of divorce had taught me to be exact with language.

"They're sleeping," he replied. There was a long, empty pause.

"There's nothing to say," I finally said.

"I know." His voice was so soft I could barely hear it.

"On the one hand, I sympathize with you - I loved Lona as much as you did - but on the other, I hate you for having taken her from me ... and for what has happened."

I told Elek that I would fly down the following morning and would stay with the girls at my parents' house until everything had been straightened out. Then we said good night.

I returned to the kitchen, now so numb that I could be methodical. For the next few hours, Julie and I discussed those things which had to be discussed: plane reservations, Lona's estate, whether the girls should finish school in New Jersey, which room would be Joanne's, which Nadine's. As we spoke, I thought back to the week before and my last conversation with Lona.

I had taken the girls roller skating, and Joanne, who was ten, had been asked by a boy to skate with him. I had told Lona about it over the phone, noting how quickly the girls were growing up; she had listened, murmuring pleasantly, but the story had ended in awkward silence. There was an air of



expectancy, a sense of waiting for the second shoe to drop. Now, in retrospect, I wondered if she had had a faint premonition, if, in some small part of her, she had known that this was the last time we'd speak. I doubted it; the silence had simply been another delicate moment between ex-husband and former wife.

But then I had no idea that Lona's death would propel me into the world of the psychic, that it would take me from the matter-of-fact routine of reporting on such matters as politics, science, and crime, and subject me to experiences which I found difficult to believe. There was no way to know that the unfinished conversation would resume and continue, that eventually I would begin to receive messages from someone who seemed to be Lona.

When Julie and I finished talking, four hours remained until flight time. There was no point in sleeping. While Julie packed a suitcase, I went down to the basement to be alone for a bit. I found some old photographs of Lona, and, sitting down, began to look through them. Here was the first picture I had ever taken of her. She was eighteen, posing in a two-piece bathing suit beside a swimming pool; it was easy to see why I'd been attracted. There were shots of her when she was pregnant, of her nursing Nadine, of her combing out Joanne's hair; I thought of all the lovely moments we'd shared. And suddenly the entire evening came down on my shoulders like a ton of thorns. I dropped to the floor and began weeping.

I cried uncontrollably for nearly an hour, tears and phlegm streaking my face. Over and over again, like a litany of pain, I groaned, "Oh, God ... please, no," and bellowed, pounding the floor with my fists, "No! No! No!" Julie understood - she had lost both parents as a child - and let me be. Then, as quickly as it had begun, it was over. Like that.

Lona was dead. And I would never see her or hear her or have anything to do with her again.

I went outside to meet the new day. The sky above the pond and the ocean was growing light, but a few bright stars remained. A solitary seagull glided across the water. I stared up at the sky and tried to talk to Lona; I told her that I had loved her and that I mourned her ... but no one, nothing, was there. Lona was dead. And I was indulging in poetry.

The flight to Philadelphia was unreal. I was exhausted and raw and surrounded by businessmen in crisp Brooks Brothers suits. For the first time, I entertained the possibility that I was dreaming, that all of this was actually a nightmare.

Fred met me at the airport and took me first to my parents' home and then to Lona's. As we drove north on 1-95, then took the Rancocas Woods exit, I considered how many times I had made this trip, and how, each time, I had looked forward to seeing Lona and the girls. Nothing would ever be the same.

The house, a small white rancher set among oak and pine trees, was barricaded with automobiles; Elek's friends had arrived to defend him. I went inside and waited in the living room. The girls came in shortly. They were pretty, dressed in fresh dresses, their hair neatly combed and tied back with yarn bows, but their faces were somber and sad; they said nothing, knowing that the one thing they wanted

was no longer theirs to have. Never before had I felt so helpless. I gathered them up in my arms, sat down on the sofa, and hugged them to me; I could think of nothing else to do.

A few minutes later, I asked after Elek. I found him sitting by himself on the back porch; he was silent, but tears streamed down his cheeks. He was a short, rather lean young man, with dark hair and a shaggy mustache. As I stood there watching him, I realized how much we had in common. We were both thirty-four - we had been born just days apart; we both had an engineering background; we had loved, married, and now lost the same woman. Despite our differences and our basic enmity, there was a certain kinship. I went over to him, put my arms around his shoulders, and suggested, "Let it out," but the silent tears continued. I explained that the girls and I would stay at my parents' house until school was over and that we would see him the following day; then we left.

The girls tried to be little stoics, but were constantly on the edge of tears; they wanted to talk about what had happened and how they felt. It was from them that I heard the first details of the accident, and because of their tale that I first began to wonder if there was more to death than extinction.

Lona arrived home from her college classes at mid-afternoon, but a short while later headed back out the door. "I'm going to the jump center," she told the girls. "Do you want to come with me or stay here?" The girls decided to stay home.

Several hours later, Elek wandered in. Nadine, who would soon be eight, ran over to her stepfather and asked him, "How was your day?"

"It was the worst day of my life," he told her. Then he sat down on the sofa and, without saying more, began to cry. The girls gathered around him and asked what was wrong.

"Your mother's never coming home," he told them. "She was killed in a jumping accident today."

Eventually, after the anguish was nearly spent, the girls went to bed. It was at this point that their story became strange, something other than a straightforward recitation of ordinary facts.

Joanne said that when finally she fell asleep she dreamed of her mother. "I saw Mommy smiling at me," she said. "There had been a crash, but she told me that she was okay."

Nadine's account was even more disturbing. "Mommy came into my bedroom and stood beside my bed and talked to me. And it was just like Mommy, except it was Mommy's spirit. She said that everything would be fine and I shouldn't worry."

I interrupted to ask Nadine whether she was describing a dream or something that had actually happened. "No," she stated with firm conviction. "I was in bed, but I was awake; I saw Mommy come into my room." I was struck by these incidents, but didn't pursue them; the girls had related them matter-of-factly, as though they were no more interesting than anything else that had happened the preceding day, and I preferred to leave the girls with that attitude. But I found them quite curious.

Lona had been raised in a Roman Catholic home, even attending a parochial school, but in recent

years her faith had been eroded. Elek was an atheist, and gradually she had sided with his lack of belief. As a result, the girls had been taught that death was a deadend proposition, that when people died, they simply ceased existing. Their having experiences now that suggested people survived death seemed incongruous. But, I realized, the strange images might be merely the result of wishful thinking - of their desire for their mother to be alive - or of some survival mechanism, a facility of the subconscious triggered in times of great stress.

Later that day, I picked up copies of the local papers. The Courier had played the story, "2 PARACHUTISTS FALL TO THEIR DEATHS," at the top of page 1; the story had been written by an old friend.

"Two members of a South Jersey parachute team plummeted to their deaths Monday when one of the victims' chutes failed to open and became entangled in the other's chute, which had opened," the story began.

"Killed were Ms. Lona Puskas, 30, of Conestoga Lane, in the Rancocas Woods section of Mount Laurel, and Richard Kelleher, 29, of the Parkway Apartments, Cherry Hill." I had never heard of Kelleher.

"Police said the victims were among five parachutists who took off in a light plane from the airpark in neighboring Lumberton Township shortly after 5:30 P.M. They had intended to make a free-fall jump from the plane.

"After circling the airfield several times at about 7,000 feet, police said, the five jumped. The group was attempting to form a ring but abandoned the plan when it couldn't maneuver to join hands.

"Four of the parachutes opened, but the fifth - belonging to Ms. Puskas - failed to deploy. She plunged into Kelleher's open parachute.

"The two became entangled in Kelleher's open chute and fell to the ground, about 2,000 feet below. Their bodies landed in an open farm field off Arc Road, about 500 yards from the landing zone."

And that was how Lona had died.

The Philadelphia Inquirer had used the story on the first page of its New Jersey section, and the following day there was a front-page story in the Evening Bulletin. It was amazing how well such stories held up. A skydiver might be in Oregon, electrocuted by power lines, and the next day photos of his body dangling from the wires would appear in newspapers across the country. This popularity had something to do with primal fears. Readers were curious about people who had gambled with death and lost, and fascinated by the types of trauma which the human body could sustain.

The other stories added details to the account of Lona's death. One noted that Lona had eaten a late lunch, a salad, at the airpark restaurant, and, on leaving, had remarked to the waitress, "I'll be back for a piece of pie after my jump." It sounded like her. Another provided a description by an eyewitness, Edward Callahan, who happened to be the president of the Mid-eastern Parachute Association and,

like Elek, was an employee of Paraflite.

"Callahan said no one has been able to pinpoint the exact cause of the accident," the story in the Bulletin explained, "but apparently Kelleher erroneously opened his chute while Mrs. Puskas was only a few feet above him.

" 'He pulled [his ripcord to open his chute] right in her face,' Callahan said, shaking his head in disbelief."

Callahan said that Kelleher had released his emergency chute, but it had fouled with his main canopy. For some unknown reason, Lona had made no attempt to pull either her main or her emergency ripcord. Both had died of "massive" injuries; I tried not to speculate on the nature of the injuries.

The following week was chaos, both real and emotional. The girls returned to school, and Julie and I made last-minute arrangements to shift Nadine's birthday party to my parents' house. Lona's father and his wife flew in from Oklahoma, and we visited them. Lona's mother arrived from El Paso, and we took care of her. In between errands, I finished the magazine article I was working on. To top everything off, Dickens, our cat, was missing in Massachusetts, and Julie was getting frantic. But our principal concern was the girls.

Initially they were very upset, nearly as much, it seemed, by the changes the accident would mean as by the death itself. Joanne was somber and philosophical, trying to reason her way out of the pain. At one point, she remarked, "I've never grown up before. I don't know how to do it. I need a mother."

Nadine was more teary and less accepting. "I only had a mother for seven years," she told me. "I knew that she would the sometime, but I wanted to have her for fifty.

"I know that you and Elek hurt," she continued,

"but Mommy was a part of my body; she wasn't a part of yours. I feel as though I've lost a part of my body."

It was all I could do, at that moment, to keep from breaking into tears.

But getting back into an ordinary routine proved to be excellent therapy. Surrounded by laughing and largely indifferent schoolmates, and comforted by their grandparents, Julie, and I, the girls soon realized that they were part of a larger, unbroken family, one that ensured the continuity of their lives.

Everyone else's emotional needs were so great that Julie's and mine went begging. We made do by making love, hurriedly, haphazardly, at stolen times and in stolen places; death may have come, but we were still alive - we could feel it.

As the days passed, I learned a bit more about the accident. Elek had been at the airpark when it occurred; Nadine, who knew a lot about skydiving, thought that her mother's body had been "squashed" and had "made a hole in the ground," but it was not so. Lona, I was told, had died of

internal injuries; the only external marks were rope burns on her arms caused by Kelleher's lines. Apparently she had been as lovely in death as she was in life.

It is strange, but such things seem to matter.

On Saturday, there was a funeral service for Lona. The girls and I did not attend, but Joanne wrote a short eulogy, which was read at the service.

"She was the most wonderful, loving person in the world. We all love her and we will always remember her as a very beautiful person. Now we must help each other be happy and gradually learn to live happily together without her. That is what we have to do. She would want us all to be happy."

The casket, flanked by flowers, was closed, but on top of it was a large photograph of Lona. She was smiling, staring into a sunlit sky, her long dark hair blowing behind her in the wind. Across the bottom of the photograph was written "Born to Fly."

I did not agree.

During the coming days, despite my best intentions, I found my mind returning to thoughts of Lona. There would be a brief respite, but then inevitably the images, memories, and questions came tumbling. So much had been left unsaid between us, and I could not fathom its being left forever unspoken. I could imagine Lona living in Peking and my not seeing her for thirty years, but I could not imagine her gone or my never seeing her again. Never seemed such an unnatural word.

One evening nearly two weeks after the accident, while we were still in New Jersey, I became obsessed with her. I lay in bed beside Julie but wanting to be with Lona, wanting to have her back just long enough to say good-bye. There was a heaviness to the night air. I pulled away from Julie, rolled over, and after a while fell asleep. And, for the first time in possibly six months, I dreamed of Lona.

I was in Lona's home, sorting out her things, deciding which to keep, which to throw away, which the girls could use, and which they might want some day. Lona stood off to one side, watching as I worked; I knew that she was dead, but accepted her presence matter-of-factly. As I went through her belongings, I asked her questions about them, and she replied. At one point, I found several books and asked if she'd been reading them; she said that they were Nadine's. I felt a certain warmth on Lona's part. It was as though she welcomed what I was doing.

When I awoke in the morning, there was still a strange heaviness about the air. The atmosphere seemed grayer, thicker. I wrote it off as humidity. I realized that my dream was unusual and puzzled over it. I did not recall ever having dreamed about a dead person before, but I had never been this close to someone who had died. And I had been thinking about the necessity of going through Lona's things. Eventually I decided that my dream was not as unusual as it had seemed at first.

I believed this until the following evening, when I dreamed of Lona again. This dream was less easy to explain away.

Once more I was in Lona's home, this time to discuss her estate with Elek. Lona was there also; again, I was aware of the fact that she was dead, but not surprised by her presence. She seemed to be furious with me.

"Now you'll see the annual statement," she said.

Her choice of words was curious, but I understood what she meant. Apparently she and Elek had invested money in his business. The annual report would indicate how much money Lona had contributed. Elek was conciliatory (he produced the statement and began to read from it), but Lona continued to rant.

"I don't care about that," I told her finally. "I don't want your money. I'm only here to see that the girls get what is theirs. I'd give anything to have things back the way they were."

"My mother would give her life for me," Lona said. "Would you?"

"Instantly," I told her. "A dozen times over. I'd do anything to have you back."

With that, she seemed to realize how deeply I cared, and fell into my arms. I held her to me tightly. The impression was so intense that I almost felt her. We wept against each other's throat. "Oh, Lona, I love you so," I cried. "I want you to be here with us."

At that point, I awoke.

Admittedly it was an unusual dream. It had been extraordinarily vivid. Even after I awoke, I could feel its emotional charge - the adrenaline was still in my veins. Unlike most dreams, it contained few fantastic elements; with the possible exception of Lona's presence, the situation and conversation had been quite realistic. Although I had been thinking about settling Lona's estate, it had never occurred to me that she might resent it. There seemed no reason for that. I found it hard to believe that my subconscious had authored her angry words.

But dreams are unpredictable, and a rational one was no less likely than any other. They are also easily dismissed. As the day wore on and I confronted ordinary problems - Dickens was still missing, the girls had to be picked up at school - the impact of the dream slowly faded. Eventually it seemed hardly more remarkable than most Grade B nightmares.

The following day, Lona's mother told me that Lona's jaw and spinal column had been broken in the accident; unpleasant, unwanted details.

The dream came back unexpectedly several days later, when Elek and I met to discuss financial matters. We sat opposite each other, much as we had in the dream, and he explained that, for all practical purposes, Lona had left no estate. For a period of time, the two of them had owned Ripcord Paracenter, and it had lost money. As a result, there was little in their bank accounts, no equity in their home, and no insurance; they were still making payments on their cars.

And I realized that, if Lona were alive, she would have died rather than have me hear this.

Affluence and the appearance of affluence had been very important to her. She had always given me the impression that she and Elek were doing quite well; my knowing otherwise would have infuriated her.

Suddenly my dream seemed rather remarkable again.

I began to wonder what, if anything, was going on.

## Chapter Two

The year following the accident was difficult for everyone. Because they were young, the girls seemed to adjust most quickly. It was June when they arrived in their new home, and so for a while it was much like an ordinary summer vacation with Daddy; they swam every day, discovered periwinkles and starfish, netted minnows in a nearby stream. But bit by bit the pain surfaced; the scars would become visible for a moment. The girls missed not only their mother but Elek, their friends, and their old lifestyle as well. At one point they became obsessed with the possibility that I too might die; I assured them that I was too bad to the young. However, before long, they made new friends and got into the swing of school.

Julie had a more difficult time. The books on parenting had promised that instant motherhood would be an ordeal, and she proved them right. Julie was an only child and had gone from being her parents' princess to being the sole object of my attention; she was not used to sharing or to the chaos caused by children. And, to make matters worse, she had a fiery temper.

Julie would blow up at the girls, I would intervene, confusing the issue, and then all hell would break loose. It was a dangerous, debilitating time, the absolute pits of our marriage.

One day I was so exhausted that I considered giving up. I was obviously failing as a husband and had doubts about my success as a father. For the first time in my life, suicide began to seem like a reasonable alternative. But that evening I had another strange dream - which wasn't a dream. I did not see anything, but while I slept, I heard Lona's voice.

"Don't worry. You're an excellent father, and the girls need you very much," the voice said.

When I awoke the next morning, it seemed that a weight had been lifted from my shoulders; I felt as relaxed and refreshed as though I had just returned from a month in the Bahamas. The words had had a powerful effect. I was grateful for them, but read nothing more into the experience. I knew that dreams often serve as a psychological safety valve. This time, the valve had worked particularly well.

The words of encouragement would have meant as much if they had been Julie's, my mother's, or Richard Nixon's. Well, maybe not if they were Nixon's.

The subject of Lona was closed. She had been cremated, her clothes given to Goodwill, her few personal effects set aside for her children to have some day. There was little left to consider; her Hie had been reduced to ashes and memorabilia.

I thought of her occasionally. I remembered our innocent lovemaking, the day that Nadine was born, the time Lona had slammed a door in my face; and when I noticed how quickly the girls were growing up, I regretted that she was not there to see it. But for all practical purposes, my period of mourning was over. Only once, when I was sorting through some old photographs of her, did I break down and cry.

The present was too demanding for me to linger in the past. Not only were there domestic battles to be



waged; there were also stories to be written, articles about everything from contemporary messiahs to crooked politicians. I was now contributing editor of two magazines and freelancing for a number of other national publications. But my tight schedule didn't keep Lona out.

In January of 1978, for the first time since shortly after the accident, I dreamed of Lona once more. As before, I knew that she was dead and realized that this was not, therefore, an ordinary event. I also discovered that, to a certain extent, I was able to control my thoughts and actions within the dream.

I encountered Lona in an amusement park. At first, I was unsure that the woman was Lona. The image was hazy. But I found that, by concentrating, I could bring it into focus. It was Lona. I could see her face and arms quite distinctly. Immediately I asked the question that had bothered me since her death.

"Do you know that I love you?"

"What?" She had heard me, but seemed startled by the silliness of my question.

"Do you know that I love you?" I repeated.

She replied that I was foolish to love her so much.

Suddenly it occurred to me that Lona might not realize that she was dead.

"Do you know" - but I could not bring myself to say the fatal word - "that I lost you?" I hedged.

"Beginning when I was eighteen," she shot back. It was a biting, sarcastic answer, implying that I had begun to lose her as soon as I had found her. And then the dream ended.

Lona was proving as difficult to get along with in fantasy as she had been in real life. If I had scripted the dream, she would have sighed that she loved me, confessed that she'd been wrong to leave me, and seduced me on the spot; instead, I was getting sarcasm and put-downs. Like the earlier dreams, this one was strange and difficult to explain, but, like every dream, it was a simple matter to forget; the light of day and the demands of life put it in a proper perspective.

I had hoped that 1978 would be a better year, that we could leave the tragedy and strife behind, but I was promptly corrected. On February 7, in the middle of a blizzard, the Atlantic went berserk, overrunning its shores, pounding down sea walls, and inundating a good portion of the New England coast. For half a day, our home became an island, surrounded by stormy water and huge blocks of floating ice. Five feet of ocean sloshed about in our basement.

Left without light or heat, we did what little we could: built a fire, baked a cake, sang songs, and - just in case - read the story of Noah.

By the time the water receded, it had done \$34,000 in damage to our home and belongings.

The house was functioning within a few days, but it would take a two-week invasion by workmen to make all of the necessary repairs. By this tune, we desperately needed a rest, and so Julie and I decided to make the best of a bad situation; in April, we took the girls on a trip.

The night before we left, I dreamed of her again. I saw her in a dimly lit hallway, leaning against a pale-gray wall; the pose was a familiar one. By now, I had grown accustomed to these encounters and was anxious to determine whether they were merely dreams or something more than dreams.

"Is it really you?" I asked.

"Yes, unfortunately," she replied. Her voice was flat, without emotion; she seemed pensive, even sad.

We talked more, but the words bypassed my memory.

Her mood changed suddenly. She smiled, and a spark of life came into her eyes. "Chase me!" she laughed, and ran off, darting from point to point, as provocative as any young lover. As I ran after her, I began to tumble through black, empty space. I felt like a special effect in Star Wars,

I was fully conscious, cognizant not only of my surroundings but also of the process of being aware; but I had lost my identity, the context of memories, the history, which defined who I was. I was no longer a person; I was a point of consciousness in space.

"This is what death must be like," I thought, and, after considering the notion for a moment, I added, "If this is what death is like, it isn't so bad."

Then the dream ended.

It had been a remarkable experience. For the first time, I felt as though I had contacted Lona - not my memories or fantasies or fears of her, but rather a real person, a someone else whom I knew.

Later that day, the dream came to seem yet more remarkable.

The girls and I were sitting on the rear deck of a ferry plowing its way across the sea. We rarely discussed their mother, and I'd said nothing about my dreams, but the conversation turned to Lona. Without warning, Joanne told me, "I dreamed about Mommy last night. It was her, but her face was all white, like a spirit. And she said to me, 'I'm going to come back to you.'"

I was astounded. It had been four months since my last dream of Lona, and Joanne hadn't mentioned dreaming about her since the accident. Now we had both dreamed about her on the same evening. The odds against this were astronomical. The only reasonable explanation was that the day before we had seen something that reminded us of her, and the memory had prompted our dreams. But even this explanation strained belief.

During the rest of the vacation, I found myself miss-ing Lona once more. She had never done any real

traveling and I regretted that she was not there to share it.

When we returned home, I soon fell back into a workaday routine, but I found that I couldn't forget my strange encounter with Lona. Finally I pulled out Volume 5 of the Encyclopaedia Britannica and read the entry on dreams.

Dreams have been viewed as an extraordinary state of consciousness for at least four thousand years and have been endowed by different peoples with varying degrees of importance. Some cultures have considered them holy - sage messages from God; others have regarded them as a nocturnal sideshow, a pointless collection of curiosities. Some dreams were thought to be prophetic - the Old Testament contains numerous examples; others, inspirational - the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge composed Kubla Khan during a dream; and yet others, physically or psychologically therapeutic.

A number of theories have attempted to explain what they are. Dreams are real, an experience different from that of the waking world but equally substantial; dreams are hallucinatory; dreams are mental scenarios incorporating real and imaginary components and depicting repressed desires; dreams are the product of a chemical known as norepinephrine.

The item I found most interesting, though, was one about a small corner of Russia, where the inhabitants believe that if a man has an erotic dream about a particular woman, she then owes him her sexual favors. I imagined the new line making the rounds of the dating bars. "Pardon me, but I had this dream about you last night..."

But I found nothing about the types of dreams that I'd been having.

It wasn't the first time that I'd had unusual dreams. When Lona and I had first separated, there had been a number of them, dreams so striking that I had jotted down notes afterward. The notes were still around, lying in a folder somewhere, but the dreams had long since been forgotten. However, there was another dream, a more memorable one, which had occurred in 1976.

At the time, our next-door neighbor was a middle-aged man with a heart condition. One evening, I dreamed of him. I dreamed that I was in bed, asleep, and that I heard someone calling my name; and then I dreamed that I awoke. I found myself in my bedroom; it appeared perfectly normal. I saw Julie, still asleep beside me, the shadow of the bureau, the mirror on the wall. Someone called again. I went to the window and discovered my neighbor's wife and another, younger woman standing outside on the lawn. They said that Frank had had an attack, but was going to be just fine. An ambulance was on its way, and they hadn't wanted it to startle me.

They returned home, but I remained at the window, watching.

Soon dozens of cars began to pull up in front of the house. Frank's children and friends got out, went inside, visited a short while, and then left. And I thought to myself, "He's much worse than they realize. They're coming to say good-bye." And then I really woke up.

That evening, when I returned home from a day in Boston, Julie told me that Frank had suffered a

heart attack that morning; it had occurred at home, while he was with his wife and daughter-in-law. He had been hospitalized, but apparently was going to recover.

Several weeks later, he died.

I did not care for such dreams. Like the odd but inexplicable dreams that the Britannica discussed, they were fascinating ... but I wasn't interested. I was neither a mystic nor a clinical psychologist; I was a journalist. I preferred observing events to being one, relied on facts much more than impressions, and, when it was possible, strove for conclusions rather than theories. At the moment, I was researching a story about an important public official who had once been accused of rape; it was not the sort of thing that lent itself to a subjective approach.

Little did I realize then that within a matter of days I'd be happy to settle for something as simple and as safe as a dream.

It happened in mid-May, nearly a year after Lona's accident, on an entirely ordinary day. The girls had gone to school, Julie had kept busy at home, and I had done some interviews. There was no reason to suspect that anything at all unusual was about to happen. I had once more managed to put Lona and my dreams about her out of my mind.

I tucked Nadine in at eight, and an hour later put Joanne to bed. Julie and I stayed up for the eleven o'clock News. This was a habit left over from our newspaper days. Each morning, we read two newspapers from cover to cover, and each evening watched the six o'clock and eleven o'clock News. After the News, we went to bed and shortly thereafter fell asleep.

Tonight there were no dreams, either ordinary or otherwise, that I could recall. I slept deeply, peacefully, oblivious to the world. Until about three o'clock.

Then I awoke. Instantaneously. Completely. Never before in my life had I awakened so suddenly. Normally there was a graceful transition. One eased into consciousness, slowly becoming aware of a full bladder or an uncovered foot, and then, depending on how full the bladder, how cold the foot, either drifted back into sleep or decided to wake up. Even when one was awakened abruptly, it took a few seconds to find one's wits. But tonight I awakened immediately, fully. Because my entire body, from my head to my feet, was vibrating violently.

I lay on my back, covered by a sheet and light blanket, staring wide-eyed at the dark ceiling. I felt the warm, solid curve of Julie beside me and heard her raspy breathing. I glanced around the room, saw the furniture, the windows, the doors. Everything was normal; nothing was out of place, and nothing extra was present. But every inch of me was shaking frantically. It was as though my body had been screwed between the jaws of a paint-mixing machine and the switch turned on.

I was frightened to death. Something was horribly wrong. As I lay there confronting the empty darkness, the first thought that passed through my mind was "Lona?" Immediately, as soon as I had thought the word, the vibration doubled in strength, and a violent but strangely pleasant chill coursed down the length of my body; it began at my head and, like a wave, flowed to my feet. I felt as though

I were awash in rubbing alcohol or ether; there was a coldness, but there was also a tingling sensation and a faint sense of anesthesia. My eyesight and my mental powers were unaffected, but the rest of me seemed to be undergoing a radical change.

The only rational explanation was that I was dying, that I was suffering a stroke or some other organic cataclysm.

The thought took me by surprise, but reassured me. Death I understood; it was a natural, normal process, and much less terrifying than the unknown.

My mind wandered from the demands of the moment. I was thirty-five years of age, white, Protestant, male. I had done some decent writing for several national magazines, as well as pieces for the local press. I would get a six-inch obituary in the Boston Globe. It had never occurred to me that I would be so young - I didn't smoke, drink, or use drugs, and I exercised regularly - or that I would be in bed. It was very strange. Here I was, dying for God's sake, and Julie was snoring away at my side. I hoped that she and the girls would get along better when I was gone. But then, my mind snapped back to the tragedy at hand.

My body was still vibrating, but now, I noticed, my heart was beating as though it was about to burst. I realized that if I didn't do something, I would die of cardiac arrest before the stroke finished me off. There was no point in waking Julie; it would only upset her. Instead, like a fool, I reached for my heart, thinking that I could repress its wild pounding with my hand.

I was in for the shock of my life.

When my hand touched my chest, I felt nothing - nothing but soft skin and the gentle rise and fall of my chest. There was no vibration, no pounding. My breathing was shallow and regular, as though I were very relaxed. My hand felt nothing. But my body was still being racked by violent sensations.

There was nothing wrong with me; but something was very wrong.

The prospect of death had disturbed me; the prospect of something else petrified me.

And again, for no apparent reason, I thought of Lona.

Immediately the shaking increased in intensity, and a strong chill suffused my body. This time, though, the chills continued, overwhelming my senses. I was confused and frightened, but there was a question I had to ask, a question that I prayed would not be answered.

"Lona," I said to myself, "is this you?"

The sensations suddenly grew stronger.

Now, I had seen *The Exorcist* and *The Omen* and I'd read a few ghost stories in my time, and I wanted

nothing to do with that sort of thing. The natural world was perplexing enough; I had no desire to become involved with the supernatural. I closed my eyes and attempted to make my mind blank, to think about absolutely nothing. Given what was happening to me, this was difficult to do, but slowly, gradually, the sensations began to fade. Then I slipped. For a second, the word "Lona" drifted across the black screen of my mind. My body began to vibrate strongly, my heart to pound alarmingly.

"You can't do this!" I thought. "I don't know what's happening or why, but it can't go on. You've got to stop. Whatever it is has got to go away." But whatever it was did not go.

Once more I tried emptying my mind, and once more it began to work; but I kept losing control, and each time I did, the feeling came surging back. Finally I tried a common relaxation technique. "Feet, relax," I told myself. "Relax, nice and limp. ... Ankles, relax. ..." Gradually I worked my way up my body. This method is employed by everyone from insomniacs to yogis, and it worked. After half an hour, the sensations grew very mild; after an hour, they disappeared.

It was now nearly five in the morning. I was exhausted, but reluctant to go back to sleep; for the first time in a very long while, the notion of sleep alarmed me. Like a child lying in a dark bedroom, I felt as though I was surrounded by the unknown, and an unknown, moreover, that had the power to touch me, to grab me in its cold hands and harm me. But finally my tired body prevailed over my fears, and I fell asleep.

The next morning, after the girls had left for school, while Julie and I were still sitting at the kitchen table, I told her what had happened.

I had never mentioned my dreams, because Julie's feelings about Lona were intense and unpleasant - not exactly hate, we were a bit too contemporary, too civilized for that, but mighty close. She resented the fact that Lona and I had shared experiences, a part of my life, which she hadn't known; she envied the fact that Lona had borne my children, while she was unable to bear children; and she had seen Lona hurt me and despised her for that.

But perhaps most important, Julie believed that if Lona had ever asked me to take her back, I would have done so.

She was wrong, but she could not be reassured.

The result was that we did not talk about Lona very much. Today, however, there seemed to be no choice.

"I have to tell you something," I began. This was a private code phrase, a clue that something more important than the kids or inflation was about to be discussed. "Something happened to me last night that I want you to know about. I don't understand it and I'm a bit afraid of it, and that's why I feel you should know."

Julie's face grew serious, and she prepared for the worst: I had been arrested, I had been unfaithful. Her mouth tensed, anticipating disaster.

She was a beautiful woman, short, with a pale complexion, dark eyes, and thick black hair, which hung nearly to her waist. She sat, listening patiently and asking an occasional question, simultaneously showing her growing concern. Julie was Jewish and had a vague belief in a hereafter but was uncomfortable with the idea of death. Her parents had died when she was quite young, and since then she had avoided the subject.

I explained that after the strange experience I had considered the possible causes: I had a physical problem; I had a psychological problem; something else - something extraneous to me - had happened. I had dismissed the first for several reasons. I was in good health and had experienced no pain: there were no other symptoms either before or after the event; and when I had felt my chest. I had realized that my body was not experiencing what I was experiencing. I was inclined to discard the second as well. There had been no prior episodes; my mind had remained lucid - observing and evaluating - during the experience; and no visual hallucinations had accompanied the sensory impressions.

Which left us with number three, which I refused to consider.

"I don't know if anything like this will happen again," I told Julie, "but if it does, and if something happens to me, if for some reason I'm unable to take care of myself, there are two people you might want to contact."

I gave her the name of a personal friend, who was also a fine psychologist. And I gave her the name of a medium, a woman I had met several years earlier while working on a story. Irene Vitello had, on occasion, been called upon to exorcise allegedly haunted houses, and it occurred to me that she might do the same for bodies.

Julie took the news quite calmly. She worried a lot about things that never came to pass and frequently went to pieces over insignificant matters, but when there was a real problem. Julie was one of the most solid and competent people I knew. Her somber response told me that she considered this a serious affair.

Unfortunately there was little we could do about it. It was not like a bad tooth, which can be pulled, or a bad child, who can be disciplined, or a bad relationship, which can be improved upon. We didn't understand the nature of the problem and therefore were unable to search for a cure. Fortunately the human animal is equipped even for such emergencies; when the mind confronts an irrational situation, it attempts 'to explain it, but, failing in that, generally blocks the situation out. Like a computer fed information for which its program is unprepared, it reports "Does Not Compute," and moves on to a problem that can be handled.

That was the approach Julie and I took. We tried not to think about what had happened, and lost ourselves in the details of daily living. For the next few days, I found myself hoping for an uneventful night's sleep each evening when I climbed into bed, but soon even that small precaution was discarded. I finished the rapist-public figure article and had to spend a week in New York going over the completed manuscript with the magazine's editors and attorneys. In May, we celebrated Nadine's

ninth birthday, and in June, Joanne's twelfth and Julie's thirtieth. Soon we were caught up in the hubbub of summer. The girls flew off to spend two weeks with Lona's mother in El Paso; as soon as they returned, sailing lessons and day camp commenced. I planted a garden and began researching another piece. And Julie made it possible - running errands, making meals, stitching up torn bathing suits.

The situation between Julie, the girls, and me had improved a great deal, but still left much to be desired; yet it seemed at times that the problem with the girls was simply an excuse for Julie and me to hash out more basic issues. Though we were alike in many ways, in others we were a study in night and day: I was easygoing, Julie temperamental; I was subtle, she direct; I was the cockeyed optimist, she the eternal pessimist. The differences in personality and preference were numerous, and in several cases, profound; and the girls were a convenient battleground.

But the situation had gotten much better and, I was sure, would improve even more.

Our approach to weird experiences had certainly worked. Three months had passed by with nary a dream, vibration, or chill; nothing had occurred in our lives that couldn't be explained by the laws of chemistry or physics, or by the theories of psychology. And I preferred our lives that way.

Then, on a Friday in August, I dreamed of Lona again.

It was a short and rather indistinct episode, but disturbing nonetheless. In the dream, Julie and I were in a car approaching an open drawbridge. As we stopped, I noticed Lona and another person standing by the side of the road. I climbed out of the car and walked toward them, intending to offer a lift, but suddenly realized that I couldn't - Julie wouldn't understand. I stood there, halfway between the car and Lona, immobilized by indecision. I very much wanted to talk with her, but knew that even if she were to go with me, we couldn't talk in the presence of Julie. It seemed that I had to make a choice.

If the dream had been more vivid, I might have been quite upset, but because of its blurry, dreamlike quality, I was soon able to forget it; and as the days passed, it appeared to be the last of its breed. We entered the fall, and then winter, and there were no sequels. Lona had finally been expunged from my subconscious or from whatever part of me had been acting up.

I sighed a sigh of immense relief.

I had no idea that what had happened during the past year and a half was merely a precursor of things to come, a short warm-up before the real game.

Somewhere deep inside me, a seed had been planted, and now, though everything was cold and quiet and comforting, that seed was taking root.



## Chapter Three

The world had gone back to normal. For eight months, Julie, the girls, and I had lived an exemplarily average suburban middle-class life. Our concerns - food bills, taxes, work, vacations, car repairs, and crabgrass - were as typical as they could be. We were prime candidates for Roper or Harris or for any other Mr. and Mrs. Average American poll.

The girls were doing well in school. Joanne was a high honors student in the seventh grade, and Nadine was doing nearly as well in fourth. Joanne was an avid horsewoman; she took riding lessons each week, subscribed to *Horse, Of Course*, and had decorated her bedroom in *Early Equine*. Nadine was into gymnastics; she took lessons too, and on any given afternoon, our little Nadia Comaneci could be found flipping and springing her way across our basement. Both of the girls had had a lovely Christmas, and a short while later, Elek had taken them to New Hampshire for a few days of skiing.

I was still freelancing for several magazines, and my work was having its small effect. A crooked businessman whom I'd written about had lost a multi-million-dollar automobile distributorship; and in February, the rapist-public figure had responded to my story with a seventy-two-million-dollar libel suit. Initially Nadine was quite upset. She thought that I was personally responsible for my twelve-million-dollar share. I assured her that I was not. But, just for the fun of it, I calculated how long it would take me to pay such a debt and concluded that they would have to attach my income until the eighth millennium A.D.

Julie kept busy chauffeuring the girls to lessons, chaperoning them at school dances, attending parent-teacher conferences, and in general carrying the standard chore-load of your average mother. The domestic problems remained, but continued to improve slowly.

The one thing that had not gone back to normal was my curiosity.

At first, because of my confusion and fears, I had attempted to forget the dreams and the strange chills that had seemed tied to Lona. I had barred them from my thoughts and, aided by the hubbub of life, had generally been successful; but occasionally the memories came back. Like an empty bottle tossed into the incoming tide, they kept washing up at my feet.

As the memories gradually grew familiar, the experiences lost their awesomeness. I found that I was able to shelve my confusion - I still didn't understand what had happened, but my not understanding didn't necessarily mean that nothing had happened - and my fears were slowly forgotten. Finally all that was left was my curiosity. I knew Who, When, and Where, but was still left with What, Why, and How, which are among the most important questions in a journalist's arsenal.

I began to wonder whether there was the remotest possibility that the experiences had been supernatural, rather than natural, in origin. I began to consider the question of survival. The person I had known as Lona - the body and mind, and the personality, thoughts, emotions, and memories that they had fashioned - was gone, but was it possible that some small portion of that person survived?

Was it possible that, somewhere in existence, there was something physical, mental, electromagnetic,

spiritual, that there was some thing or some energy, which I would have recognized as belonging to her? And if there was, was there any way to detect it?

In its simplest form, mine was merely a restating of one of man's oldest questions: Does consciousness continue in some form after biological death? Is there something that, for lack of a better word, might be termed a soul?

Since the dawn of civilization, man has believed that there is such a thing; not until the sixth century B.C. did he consider the notion that death is extinction, that life is a play without curtain calls. But after more than fifty thousand years of asking the question, there is still no answer. There is a bit of tantalizing evidence and a wealth of speculation, but no solid theories or anything even vaguely resembling a fact.

We have come to consider death as in the purview not of science but of philosophy and religion. You either believe in the soul and its survival or you do not; thinking has nothing to do with it.

Lona had been raised in the Roman Catholic faith and for most of her life had believed in sin, salvation, Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, communion, confession, heaven, and hell. I had been raised in the Presbyterian faith, the son of a fundamentalist minister, and my beliefs were similar, but I'd never been particularly concerned about the issue of life after death. I felt that the principal value of religion, like that of philosophy, was that it helped one to lead a more moral and rewarding life; what happened afterward seemed largely irrelevant.

But now my curiosity was aroused. I began to think of Lona's death as a possible personal assignment, a subject I could research and write about in much the same way as I would an article on business or science or politics. Over a period of weeks, the idea grew more and more appealing. Finally, a bit after midnight on the first day of spring of 1979 - nearly two years after the accident - I made a fateful decision. While Julie and the girls slept, I jotted a few personal notes in my notebook.

March 20, 1979

Tomorrow I will begin researching a book that has to do with her. I contemplate the task with a mixture of enthusiasm, ennui, and dread. I loved Lona very much, and large portions of my life and my writing were devoted to her, to touching her, to showing her something in me, some part of me, that she would love. Until the last, I hoped that someday she would pick up something I had written, and after reading it, realize that she still loved me. I look forward to writing about Lona again because I may recapture a bit of that caring, that feeling, because I may sample that love, if only in memory, again. And I look forward to it because I believe she deserves a more fitting testament than she has thus far had. The ennui is prompted by the difficulties - in research, in writing, in offending the sensibilities of people close to me. And the dread, the fear that I might actually find what I am searching for. If I were to encounter Lona in some altered state of consciousness - hypnosis, a dream - I think I could handle it; but if I were to encounter her in the flesh, find her in the living room of my home, see her face outside a window, I think I might go mad. As with the rest of my journalistic experience, I would prefer to remain a witness rather than become a participant, to observe death, but not be touched by it.

Once before, I had searched for Lona when I knew she wasn't there. And it had proved one of the most bizarre and overwhelming experiences of my life.

It happened when we were young and were first dating each other in college. I had already fallen in love with Lona and had eyes for no one else, but she was quite popular and was seeing several other students. One evening, I stopped by to see her just as she was returning from a date; I sat in the front seat of my car and watched as she kissed the boy good night. And I became quite upset, unreasonably upset. Youth and innocence and naivete and a flair for the dramatic played a part, but something else was involved as well. It suddenly seemed to me that I didn't know Lona as well as I had thought and that I certainly didn't know her as well as I needed to know her.

I responded to the situation by doing something instinctive, something that made no sense but seemed to fit.

Though it was nearly midnight, I left El Paso and drove north through the desert to La Union, New Mexico, a small farming community thirty miles away. Lona had lived there for several years as a child, and the two of us had once visited her old home, a small white adobe building surrounded by hundreds of acres of flat farmland. We had had a picnic in the long grass of the backyard and had toured the deserted grounds. She had shown me the withered rose arbor, the spot where her dog had been tied, the crab apple tree that she had climbed.

I had felt very close to Lona there.

And now, for some ill-defined reason, I returned to this empty house.

I climbed out of the car, switched on my flashlight, and began to search, not knowing what it was that I hoped to find. I poked about in the shadows, went out back, and found the rear door open. I hesitated for a second, then stepped inside, and for the next hour wandered back and forth from room to room - kitchen, living room, master bedroom, bathroom, children's bedroom - trying to imagine the living that had happened there: Lona glowing in front of the fireplace ... all wet in the tub ... tucked into bed ... lying in the dark, listening to her parents quarreling in the next room. I memorized the rooms and their contents - a bar of soap, a church calendar, a Mason jar of nails. But suddenly, for no apparent reason, I became absolutely panic-stricken.

I ran from the house, jumped into my car, and started it; I was terrified, desperate to escape. The tires kicked up gravel and the headlights swept across the front of the house as I careened around the circular driveway toward the road. I gasped for air and began to sob, and my eyes filled with tears. Because I knew - against all reason and against all knowledge I knew - that if I looked back, I would see a little eleven-year-old girl with long dark pigtails standing on the front porch of that home. I knew that I would see Lona.

This conviction was irrational, no doubt the product of an overactive imagination, but so real that I could not have turned my head toward the house at that moment. Instead, I stared straight ahead, fixing my eyes on the white line of the highway, and wept all the way back to El Paso.

It was a strange and unique experience - nothing like it had ever happened to me before and nothing like it has happened to me since - but so bizarre, so inexplicable, that I never mentioned it to anyone, not to Lona or to Julie, not even to my psychologist friend. I tried to rationalize it away - it was an emotional hallucination, a momentary triumph of fantasy over reality - and soon forgot it.

But now I was setting out in search of Lona again, and this time, she was no more real, no more present, than she had been then. I suspected that my search would not take me back to La Union, but had little idea where it would lead; beginning the search was like setting out on a trip without a road map and with only the vaguest idea of one's destination. I knew only that my quest would begin with Irene Vitello.

I had met Irene five months before Lona's death while working on a story for a magazine. I had needed a medium - someone who claimed they were able to communicate with the dead - and a number of individuals had recommended her. She was honest, they said, seemed to have genuine ability, and, because she did not charge for her services, was less susceptible than most to charges of fraud. I don't recall what, if anything, I expected - a gypsy fortune teller, perhaps - but she was certainly not what one might have imagined.

Irene was in her early forties, an attractive woman with dark eyes and short silver-blond hair; she was a nurse, the mother of three daughters, and the wife of a salesman for a pharmaceutical company. The family lived in a beautiful Federalist-Colonial home situated in woods on the edge of a lake in Plymouth (home of the Pilgrims), Massachusetts. She was as average as most other affluent suburban housewives. What distinguished her from her neighbors was that Irene was a medium and the pastor of a Spiritualist church.

Spiritualism had been discovered, as it were, in 1848, when two sisters, Margaret and Kate Fox, had begun to hear strange noises in their cottage in the village of Hydesville, New York. The knockings, it developed, were not caused by squirrels or wind-whipped branches, but rather by the spirit of an itinerant peddler who had been murdered and buried in the cellar of the house. The sisters and the phenomena they precipitated were studied intensely by, among others, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist, and never found to be fraudulent. But in 1888, Margaret admitted that the rappings were a hoax. The following year, however, she recanted, saying that the statement had been made under the influence of others.

In 1904, some fifty-six years after the initial bumps in the night, a human skeleton was discovered behind a cellar wall in the Fox home.

Whether legitimate or not, the Fox sisters generated a great deal of interest in attempts to communicate with the dead, an interest that eventually led to the formation of Spiritualist churches. There are now more than a dozen Spiritualist denominations in the United States; the largest, the National Spiritualist Association of Churches (NSAC), represents a hundred and sixty-four congregations, including the one pastored by Irene Vitello. Total membership in Spiritualist churches is estimated at two hundred thousand.

Though essentially Christian, similar to Christianity in style of worship and many of the tenets of

faith, Spiritualist churches espouse certain beliefs that would fracture the eyebrows of most Methodists and Roman Catholics. The NSAC Declaration of Principles sets forth a unique set of dogmas:

We affirm that the existence and personal identity of the individual continue after the change called death.

We affirm that communication with the so-called dead is a fact, scientifically proven by the phenomena of Spiritualism.

We affirm that the precept of Prophecy contained in the Bible is a Divine attribute proven through Mediumship.

Unlike other congregations, Spiritualists not only profess that life continues after death but also claim that they can prove it. Irene had certainly not proven it to my satisfaction, but just as certainly she had given me something to think about.

I had met with her on two occasions, the first an interview, the second a reading - a session during which she had attempted to analyze my character and to bring me messages from dead individuals. Though she knew nothing about me, seemingly she was quite successful. My memories of the experience were a bit hazy, but I recalled being impressed by several things.

I was struck by Irene herself. Normally I develop a rapport with people rather quickly, but with Irene I couldn't quite connect. She seemed strangely isolated, set apart; I felt that she was interested in me and yet at the same time completely indifferent. "Neutral" was the word that seemed best to describe her. I had never encountered anyone quite like her before.

I also recalled being surprised by something she'd said. Irene had remarked that Julie was unable to have children, which only a few friends and family members were aware of. But then she had gone on to say that Julie shouldn't worry, that it might seem miraculous, but she would eventually have children. I scored this as a complete miss; it was impossible for Julie to have children. But five months later, Lona had died, and now Julie had Joanne and Nadine.

Was this simply a coincidence or was it something else?

Suddenly I remembered another of Irene's remarks. As I was leaving, she told me, "It's very important that you believe in the soul." Her seriousness and the intensity in her voice had impressed and puzzled me; I hadn't really understood them. Now I wondered, Was it possible that she had had a premonition of Lona's death?

Fortunately I had kept my notes and the transcript of the reading. I dug through my file cabinets and found them.

The reading took place in Irene's office, a sun-filled room overlooking the lake, on the afternoon of January 19, 1977; we sat across from each other, with my tape recorder on a nearby table.

About fifteen minutes into the session, she was talking about Julie. "Okay, now I'm still with the lady," she said. "I'm going with a problem down in the female organs. I want, I feel as though I'm going in around the fallopian tubes, and I'm having a female problem. Do you, are you aware of this?" I was; she had pinpointed Julie's problem exactly. "Okay. I feel an apprehension around her regarding family and so forth because of the problem she has in the pelvic area. I feel that it - you're going to say that it's almost like a miracle - but it's going to be corrected; I feel positive about it, I feel good about it. Okay?"

She described Julie and her interests quite accurately, noted that we were having marital problems, and said that eventually they would be resolved. She told me that I had two sisters living in New York (I did), and discussed their family situations accurately. All of this from a woman who knew only my name, the name of the magazine I was working for, and a bit about the article I was writing. It was incredible guesswork, but not nearly as startling as some of the other things she said.

At one point, Irene began to talk about the dead.

"Why do I keep sensing a child around you? Did you know of anyone in your family ..." She paused momentarily, as though lost in thought, and then suddenly asked me, "Did you lose a brother?"

I was absolutely stunned. I had lost a brother, but rarely thought about him. My mother had a son before I was born, but he died shortly after birth. This was a painful footnote in the family history, which I hadn't heard about until I was a teenager.

I had never thought of myself as having a brother, but I had.

"I feel that the child went out [died] very quickly," Irene continued. "It's as though, 'I was here, and then I wasn't here.' But in and around that child, I see blood. There's blood, something to do with blood, okay ... because I'm seeing blood. And I don't like the ... feeling, so 'I'm just going to block it. Okay?"

My mother suffered from uremic poisoning during her first pregnancy, and toxins passed into the infant's blood; the toxins had killed him.

As I read through the transcript, I found my amazement growing anew.

"Also, I have a gentleman that... comes ... from the spirit realm," Irene went on, "and I'm feeling ... a fatherly vibration with him. Okay, now you may say, 'Father is not in spirit,' but I'm saying that I feel a gentleman who is a fatherly vibration. Whether he's a father or grandfather, I don't care.

"Okay, I feel very definitely that as I tune into his vibration, I immediately got a pain in the chest area. Okay? And I'm over in the heart area. And I also felt like a tingling or like a pain-like feeling down my left arm. And it was as though I had no voice; I couldn't speak. My voice was gone from me."

Shortly before his death, my maternal grandfather suffered a stroke, which paralyzed his left side and

left him unable to speak; he died of heart failure.

Now, it might have been safe to assume that someone my age had lost a grandfather, and it might even have been prudent to suppose that his heart had been involved - the actuarial tables may favor such a bet; but the details that Irene provided rewrote the laws of probability.

If I had any doubts left, or rather, if I had anything but doubts left, Irene took care of the matter a few minutes later with a demonstration of something called psychometry. Psychometry is obtaining information about a person simply by holding an object that person has owned, an ability allegedly possessed by certain individuals. The technique is not exactly endorsed by the National Academy of Sciences.

Nonetheless, I'd brought along several pieces of family jewelry with which to test the theory. One by one, I handed them to Irene, and she attempted to tell me something about the owner.

As soon as I gave her a watch that had once belonged to my grandfather, she said, "Does this watch belong to the man who keeps walking in and out? Yeah, I feel that it does."

How does one explain a series of such perfect guesses? As a journalist, I was not only obligated to try; it was second nature for me to ask why. But when the neurons kept burning out, my mind automatically shut down; I stopped responding to Irene's revelations. I sat there, my head nodding normally, uh-huh-ing her at appropriate moments, but strangely indifferent to what was being said. It would have made little difference if she had been delivering a message from Abraham Lincoln or announcing that my pants were on fire. The facts available did not compute, so I was not computing.

In a way, I was adopting Irene's approach: I observed and duly noted, but did not respond to the experience; it was not unlike watching TV.

But now I intended to resurrect the unanswered questions and to raise a few new ones as well. Why was I having these dreams? What had happened that night in the bedroom when all of my senses had seemed to go haywire? And this time I wasn't going to accept "Does Not Compute" for an answer.

I telephoned Irene, told her a bit about Lona's death, and arranged to meet her the following Monday.

Monday was an overcast, bitter-cold day. From the window of Irene's living room, one saw bare trees, a frozen lake, and, on the hill beyond, the home of comedian Dick Gregory. Irene seemed much the same as she was the last time I'd seen her. She sat at one end of the room, a large, airy space decorated with oriental landscapes and objects d'art, and I sat at the other. I was still not making contact.

After a few minutes of aimless conversation, I asked if she'd foreseen Lona's death.

"I felt that something of a violent nature was going to occur," she told me, "not the usual type of death. It wasn't the type of feeling I would have had with a car accident or disease. There was an inner excitement. I felt that it was going to be a very sudden thing."

I mentioned the dreams I'd been having and asked if it was possible that they were something more than dreams.

According to Irene, it was possible. "Dreams are very significant to me," she said. "I firmly believe in communication via dreams. Dreams remembered in black and white are generally produced by the subconscious mind, not the deeper consciousness; but if the dream's in color, that has meaning. It's a spiritual dream and shouldn't be ignored."

She noted that after she'd lost her first husband, he had returned to her twice in dreams. "In each case, I was having some difficulties," she explained, "and he came to me in a dream, held my hand, and reassured me."

I recalled the time that I'd heard Lona's voice when Julie and I were waging war. "Don't worry. You're an excellent father, and the girls need you very much," she had said. I recalled how much the words had meant.

In one respect, I was glad to know that my experience was not unique, that I was not flipping out in some new, unidentified way, but in another, I was 'deeply disturbed. The information seemed to confirm, to substantiate in some small part, what was, at heart, an irrational event; it made the craziness seem a bit more sane, and I did not welcome that. It was difficult enough to coax order and meaning from cold, hard facts.

Somewhat reluctantly I told Irene about my mock heart attack (it was one thing to have unusual dreams, but something else entirely to be throttled by chills and strange vibrations; people would soon be raising their eyebrows and smiling indulgently at me). Again, Irene had had a similar experience; and again, I did not find it particularly reassuring.

"It happened when I was eight," Irene began. "I had gone to bed, said my prayers, and while I was lying there with my eyes wide open, a bright light had formed at the foot of the bed. At first, it took on an oval shape, but then it turned into the image of a woman, a beautiful woman with a veil over her head and shoulders. She was surrounded by a brilliant white light. It frightened me, and I ran downstairs to tell my parents about the lady in light in my bedroom."

It was, Irene said, the first time that she'd seen a spirit; the experience, she recalled, had included impressions of chills and vibration.

"I believe that she [Lona] was trying to come through to you, to let her presence be known," Irene told me. "You were sensing that fine vibration. You probably didn't see a materialization because your nervousness was working against it. The light will frighten you," she explained. "It's brighter than anything you've ever seen. But when you're afraid, the light goes away."

"Oh, great," I thought. What all of this boiled down to was ghosts.

Now, ghosts are fine as a historical curiosity (no castle is complete without one) and useful as a



dramatic device (Hamlet's father is particularly memorable); on Halloween they are even acceptable in the flesh in their Springmaid contour sheets. But the idea of a real one, of the disembodied spirit of a person who had died, visiting my bedroom in the middle of the night: that idea was not at all appealing. It was rather alarming.

I broached my Exorcist fears with Irene.

"If you're tuning into your ex-wife, she wouldn't possess you," she promised. "If someone has loved you, they continue to love you; they wouldn't wish you any harm. Possession is really very rare; most cases are obsessive, not possessive."

She went on to give me a free introductory course on the paranormal.

According to Irene, Spiritualists believe that all existence, whether that of the normal, living world or that of the dead, is atomic in structure, which should reassure Einstein. But in the case of the dead, the atoms move, or "vibrate," much more rapidly than they do in ordinary matter; as a result, spirit entities are imperceptible to ordinary folk.

This theory, though possibly fabricated out of thin air, reminded me of another one. Some scientists and science writers, including Isaac Asimov, have speculated about whether it is possible to exceed the speed of light and have concluded that it may be possible - in fact, that entire universes might exist which move at super speeds. But, Asimov notes, entities moving faster than the speed of light could never be made aware of us, nor could we be made aware of them.

Irene's theory, I conceded, was no more bizarre than the notion of black holes or quasars; it just didn't have the science behind it.

However, mediums, Irene said, were able to "tune into" the spirit world in a variety of ways. Trance mediums temporarily relinquished the use of their body to a spirit, permitting the spirit to speak directly; physical mediums "felt" physical sensations; mental mediums received mental impressions of sounds or images or both. Frequently the various approaches overlapped. Irene, for instance, had described my grandfather's appearance, but had also felt pains relating to Ms death.

The big trick was to interpret the data received correctly. As in real life, each bit of information contained both objective and subjective possibilities; there were facts, and there was poetry. When, for example, a medium saw a rose during a reading, the options were nearly endless: the spirit was named Rose, the message was for someone named Rose, the spirit was fond of roses (or allergic to them), the person sitting for the reading was going to receive a rose. If the rose was in full bloom, it might mean good health; if withered, a serious illness. If the rose was red, it was a sign of vitality; if black, a symbol of death.

Western Union was much more precise, but unfortunately didn't have any offices in the hereafter.

"Interpretation is the most important aspect," Irene said. "Even the best mediums are only eighty percent accurate."

Their abilities made it possible for mediums to perform otherwise impossible feats. Because they could see and hear spirits, they were able to relay messages between the dead and the living. During a reading, they were able to discern a person's past and future. They could analyze character merely by looking at someone or by touching something that person owned. But perhaps most amazingly, they were able to talk about death as casually and as knowingly as a doctor might discuss pneumonia or a mechanic talk about four-barrel carbs.

Listening to Irene was an experience that sorely tried one's credulity.

"Death is like going to sleep and waking up again," Irene explained. "When you wake up, you're still alive, but in a different dimension. You take all your innate qualities and abilities over there," she went on, her voice as flat and as matter-of-fact as though she were sharing a recipe for clam chowder. "You retain your personality, your negative as well as your positive attributes. The things that you were most interested in here - flowers, children, music - are there, but in a more rarified form. And you're still with those individuals, already in spirit, that you loved in life; if you hated someone, you wouldn't be with them."

My mind was beginning to feel a bit numb.

"If you pass through a violent death," she continued, "the transition is different than in a normal death. At first, you don't even know what's happened. You find yourself in a gray zone, a resting place; you get it together there, letting go of your physical body, finding out about your spiritual body. A person who has died violently may stay close to the earth's vibration; they may linger near the place of the accident."

Despite the strength of my intentions, my mind, I realized, was fast shutting down. All of this might be as basic as ABC to Irene, but it was gibberish to me, a lot of words unsupported by facts or personal experience. I was beginning to feel the same leaden-headed-ness that appears on the second day of an est seminar and during weekend retreats with the followers of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon. I was hearing language shorn of meaning, sounds devoid of sense. Psychologists consider this one of the most disorienting of experiences.

"Your ex-wife would be closer to you because of the children," Irene was saying. "I feel that she's lingering in your home; she's very much around her children. And she'll come very freely when there's a need."

I did not want to hear any more.

## Chapter Four

Where did this thing called life finally lead?

When confronted by a bleak situation, the journalist's standard response is to head for the nearest library to see what else has been written on the subject. I did so, and discovered that there were a number of individuals who, in fact, were attempting to study death itself, to observe, describe, define, and explain it in much the same way that a botanist might analyze a new type of plant.

Dr. Raymond A. Moody, Jr., a psychiatrist, has written several bestsellers about the near-death experience (dying, but being revived; Moody's subjects describe having "experienced" something between dying and returning to consciousness). Moody has studied more than a hundred cases and found the stories remarkably similar; he has even identified fifteen separate elements that seem to recur over and over again. Using these common elements, he has fashioned a "model" description of the near-death experience in *Life After Life*.

"A man is dying and, as he reaches the point of greatest physical distress, he hears himself pronounced dead by his doctor. He begins to hear an uncomfortable noise, a loud ringing or buzzing, and at the same time feels himself moving very rapidly through a long dark tunnel. After this, he suddenly finds himself outside of his own physical body....

"Soon other things begin to happen. Others come to meet and to help him. He glimpses the spirits of relatives and friends who have already died, and a loving, warm spirit of a kind he has never encountered before - a being of light - appears before him. ... At some point, he finds himself approaching some sort of barrier or border, apparently representing the limit between earthly life and the next life. Yet, he finds that he must go back to the earth, that the time for his death has not yet come. ... He somehow reunites with his physical body and lives... ."

Moody's method is primarily anecdotal. He listens to and reports on uncorroborated stories. He does not identify his subjects, and his "model" sounds like something the Special Effects Department has whipped up for the sequel to *Star Wars*. But interestingly, his findings - the experience that he has described - are supported by the independent research of other investigators.

Another psychiatrist, Dr. Ian Stevenson, Carlson Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Virginia, has approached the question of survival from a different point of view; over a period of twenty-five years, he has studied more than sixteen hundred cases involving reincarnation - instances of individuals claiming to remember former lives. The most compelling accounts are summarized in his book *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*.

There is the case of Prakash, an Indian boy who, at the age of four and a half, began to discuss his earlier life as Nirmal, a child who had died in another village more than five years before. When taken to the second village, Prakash successfully identified all Nirmal's relatives by name. And there is the case of Swarnlata, an Indian girl who, at three and a half, began to describe the life of Biya, a woman who had died twelve years earlier in a village a hundred miles away. The child recognized the dead woman's relatives and discussed her life in ultimate, sometimes embarrassing, detail. Stevenson

discovered that, of the forty-nine factual statements that Swarnlata had made about Biya, all but two were correct.

Despite the weight of such instances, Stevenson re-mained the professional skeptic. In a paper published in the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* in 1977, he had concluded that "the evidence of human survival after death is strong enough to permit a belief in sur-vival on the basis of the evidence. On the other hand, this evidence - imperfect as it remains - certainly does not compel such a belief."

In other words, Who knows?

Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, a psychiatrist best known for her work with dying patients, thinks that she knows. Several dramatic personal experiences have turned her into a believer in the hereafter. One, reported in *Newsweek*, involved the appearance in her office of a former patient who had been dead for six months. Another, recounted in an interview in *New Age* magazine, was less startling, but, at least as far as I was concerned, even more intriguing.

It occurred while Kubler-Ross was attending a workshop in Virginia; during the workshop, she stayed at a small, isolated guest house.

"This was a long tune ago, when I didn't believe in ghosts and spooks and all this," Kubler-Ross explained. "The first night I was in this house in the forest alone, I "had the absolute distinct feeling that I wasn't alone in the house. The house was filled with something. ... I had the distinct feeling that the whole house was full of ... now I would say full of entities, but in those days I didn't have those words...."

The following night, all hell broke loose.

"I went to bed and it was the most incredible night of my entire life. I tried to sleep but I couldn't - I remember tossing back and forth. ... I was delirious, fighting to sleep, wanting to sleep, but knowing that I couldn't fight it much longer. ... And then it hit me like lightning - the whole experience. ... What happened is that I went through every single death of every single one of my thousands of patients. ... And when I say I went through their death processes, I mean this literally. ... And this repeated itself a thousand times -always in a different version but with the same agony. ..." Eventually the death trip ended, but the experience was not yet over.

"I was lying on my back ... [and] my abdominal walls started to vibrate at a very very high speed - it was going super, super fast - and I looked at my belly and what I saw was anatomically impossible. ... And every time I watched a part of my body, it started to follow, vibrating. And then I looked at the closet, and it started to vibrate. And the walls started to vibrate, and the whole world. ... And in front of me something opened. It was a visual image. ... The moment that I focused on it, it turned into a lotus flower bud. It had the most incredible colors - beauty that I cannot put into words. ... Behind this flower bud came something like a sunrise - an incredible light...."

Of the various researchers I'd read about, Kubler-Ross seemed the "craziest" and therefore the least

credible; and yet, although I resisted, I found myself identifying with her most strongly. I recalled the night I'd spent in a deserted house in La Union, New Mexico, and the violent vibrations I'd felt in the bedroom of my own home. My experiences were not her experience - the two were certainly not the same - but the subtle similarities spoke to me, piqued my curiosity.

I also recalled Irene Vitello's description of a "brilliant white light." Was it possible that she and Kubler-Ross had seen the same thing?

There were other researchers, dozens of individuals and organizations, among them the British Society for Psychical Research and the American Society for Psychical Research. The latter had tested the notion of survival by collecting deathbed observations (reports of dying patients made by doctors and nurses), by investigating cases "suggestive" of reincarnation, and by studying individuals who were allegedly able to leave their physical body. The Society, like Stevenson, concluded that the evidence did not rule out the possibility of survival and did not prove it.

All of which was fine and fascinating, but had little to do with me. Lona's fall from an altitude of 7,000 feet was not, after all, a near-death experience; she had died, once and for all. She had not, to the best of my knowledge, been reincarnated in some distant Indian village. And she had not walked into my office or wired me a bouquet of lotus buds. The research that others had done did not seem to relate to my situation, and I hesitated even to read about their experiences.

While working on a story that touched on hypnosis, I had once learned about two interesting, if somewhat obscure, phenomena. Cryptomnesia is a known ability of the subconscious mind to record information which was either ignored or soon forgotten by the conscious mind; later, during an altered state of consciousness - hypnosis, meditation, a dream, a fit of anger - such information might emerge as a seemingly original creation. For example: A boy of ten sees a movie about Ogodei Khan, a thirteenth-century Mongol warrior; thirty years later, he dreams about the Khan and is quite amazed; he does not recall ever having read or seen anything that could account for the dream's rich detail.

The phenomenon of personation takes the matter one step further: Instead of dreaming about the Khan, the now-grown moviegoer claims while hypnotized that he is Ogodei Khan; he talks about himself, accurately describes life in thirteenth-century China, and even begins to weep when he speaks about his death. The hypnotist is astounded.

In short, what goes in may well come out I had no idea what other experiences, if any, I might be in for, but I intended them to be mine; I didn't want to hear Moody's loud ringing or to see Stevenson's little Indian boy in my dream or to smell Kubler-Ross's flowers. If I did, I would have to write them off as possibly the products of my own subconscious.

I set the books aside.

Clearly this writing project was going to be unlike anything I'd ever tackled before. There were no likely interview subjects, no experiments I could run. There were only a few strange dreams, one frightening but apparently isolated incident, and a medium who explained her cogent messages with mystical gobbledy-gook. Things didn't look very promising.

I didn't realize it then, but my research was like an accident waiting to happen. Eventually it would come to seem that the material was discovering the researcher, that I had inadvertently become some sort of psychic guinea pig. But for the moment, the medium seemed my only likely source.

Unfortunately Irene Vitello now knew something about me and something about Lona's death; anything she said would therefore be somewhat suspect. I decided to try some mediums who knew absolutely nothing about me. After a bit of checking, I obtained the names of three individuals who seemed to be highly regarded. All were women, lived in eastern Massachusetts, and were connected in one way or another with Spiritualist churches. In each case, I phoned them and told them my name, that I was researching a book, and that I wanted to sit with them for a reading. I told them nothing more about either myself or the book. The readings took place within a few days of my phone calls.

It would therefore have been extremely difficult for them to obtain any significant information about me through ordinary means.

The night before the first reading, on April 8, 1979, I dreamed about Lona for the first time in nearly a year. I saw her alone in the midst of darkness, as though she were standing beneath a streetlamp at the end of a midnight-black street. I had a feeling that we had an appointment to meet each other, and I was very late. Lona had grown tired, but was still waiting for me patiently. She was wearing a black-and-white dress that I recognized; it was one of my favorites, an outfit she'd made and worn when she was carrying Nadine. As I got closer, I saw her more clearly - her long dark hair, the serious, rather somber, look on her face; it seemed that she had something unpleasant but necessary to say.

But before either of us could say anything, the dream ended.

The dream was interesting, but, given the fact that I'd been thinking about Lona and was scheduled for a reading, hardly seemed remarkable.

The following day was cold and gray and threatened rain. In the afternoon, I drove down to Buzzards Bay, on the north side of the Cape Cod Canal. After wandering about the boat yards and bait shops, I finally found Nelda Speers' home, a small, comfortable-looking house on a quiet residential street. The woman who answered the door was equally appealing.

Nelda Speers was a middle-aged Kewpie doll, a short heavysset woman with graying hair and brightly rouged cheeks. She and her home were equally well groomed

She wore crisp brown slacks, a striped sweater topped with a white cardigan, beige sandals, and a fresh dab of pink lipstick. I guessed that she was in her mid-fifties. I later learned that she had been a singer and dancer before getting married and raising a family.

We sat in her living room and talked for a short while about her interest in the paranormal. Much of what she'd said I'd already heard from Irene Vitello, but Nelda had some interesting observations of her own. She compared the "vibrations" of Spiritualist theory to the blades of a fan. When the blades move slowly, they are visible, but as they pick up speed, seem to disappear, becoming visible once

more only when they slow down. In the same way, she explained, the spirit of the dead person seems nonexistent because it vibrates so rapidly, but when it returns to the heavy vibrations of the "earth plane," it becomes perceptible again.

When this happens, she said, a normal person might feel a strange chill or flush of heat, a slight rustling of the hair, or "a little breeze when no breeze is blowing." A medium, on the other hand, might see and hear the spirit clearly.

Nelda also noted that in order to read, "You have to be relaxed, empty your mind of thoughts. You become an empty receptacle."

After half an hour, I suggested that we start with the reading.

Nelda leaned back on the couch and closed her eyes. Her hands, I noticed, were carefully arranged in her lap, the palms facing up and fingers curled in, forming little bowls. She breathed deeply several times, was silent, and after a few minutes began to speak. I switched on the tape recorder.

"Well, the first thing that I got with you was a lot of gaiety," she started. "But I also get a string of sadness there. It's like a little gray cloud, always around you. I feel a great deal of tension behind the eyes, as though I'm trying to hold back something. My throat begins to ache."

I knew the feelings she was describing. Occasionally, when I reminisced about Lona a bit or when things were going badly with Julie, the tears would build behind my eyes, the crying coalesce like a cancer in my throat. But those were feelings that everyone had at times.

"It has to do with something that was very important to you at one time in your life," she explained, "and it's like lost. There was so much there at one time, and then suddenly it's not there. I don't know how to say it, except you're still, it's like you're still searching for the lost - I don't know why I say lost chord. That's the way it came to me - still searching for the lost chord."

I thought of Lona.

But Nelda was already off on a different subject.

"I don't know who's here now," she was saying, "but who was it that had difficulty before they went over expressing themselves? Because it's like my tongue wants, I'm stuttering a little bit. My thoughts are a little bit mixed up. Who is this with the thick tongue, like a stroke? You know how people have a stroke, and you have a thick tongue. They're here and they want to be recognized by you."

Like Irene Vitello, Nelda seemed to be talking about my maternal grandfather.

She went on to describe other spirits, who apparently were drifting in and out of the room. There was a woman she thought was my grandmother; the description was too vague for me to tell. There was a man who had known my father professionally and had died of cancer of the throat; such a person had existed. And there was another man, named John, whom I'd known in "the newspaper world." I hadn't

told Nelda that 'I'd worked for newspapers, but it would have been a safe guess. I'd known at least three Johns in the business but, as far as I knew, all were still alive.

Nelda mentioned a problem involving children. "I don't know if you have any children around you," she said, "but I see two, two children. Would there have been three at some point?"

I wondered if she meant my infant brother.

"But I do get dissension there. I feel the dissension, a little bit of dissension in regard to certain standards that have to be kept."

I thought of the battles that Julie and I had waged over the disciplining of the girls.

Another of her on-the-mark comments really puzzled me. "It's like you're dragging one foot," she noted early on, and as the reading progressed, she kept returning to the image. "It's like you're still dragging one foot." "They felt that they were dragging one foot." The grotesque motif would have meant little to anyone else, but had a special significance for me. For the past two months, I'd been walking somewhat strangely. Occasionally, for no apparent reason, I tended to walk on the outside of my left foot, and when I halted, to rest on it, it was a form of dragging. There was no physical explanation, and eventually I had written it off as psychosomatic, a symptom, perhaps, of inner laziness.

Now I found myself reminded of it again and again; it seemed a strange coincidence.

As Nelda read, she appeared to grow younger; the muscles of her face relaxed, and some of the lines disappeared. From time to time, her pale-blue eyes fluttered open and then fluttered shut, and once or twice she rubbed her forehead, as though attempting to improve her concentration. Her voice was normally soft and even, but when she discussed my father's friend, it turned into a sibilant machine gun, rattling off his desperate, breathless message. For that one moment, she had seemed nearly possessed.

But now she was as calm and quiet as the afternoon.

"I am getting a very lovely lady here," she told me, "and her hair is long. And she takes a deep breath and she said, 'Where did I go wrong? I tried.' And she said, 'Yes, I've had tears over here too.' She puts her hands on your shoulders. 'I love you. I always will.'"

I wondered who this could be.

"Did she have anything in this area before she went over?" Nelda asked, lightly touching her forehead. "I'm getting a very, I got a pressing, and it was painful right in here." The description made no sense to me.

"But it's as though she's putting her hands on your shoulders. She's saying, 'I can only stay for a



minute, then I have to go. I've just come in to tell you that I'm all right. I'm learning.' And she kind of laughed, she said, 'I'm learning the ropes.'"

"My God!" I thought. "Parachute lines." Kelleher's lines, the lines that had snared Lona from the sky and had cut into her arms. Lona's death had been caused by the "ropes" of a parachute.

Nelda rambled on, unaware of the deep impression she'd made. " 'I was very confused when I came over here. I didn't know up from down. Everything was all mixed up.' And then, she said, 'Suddenly I woke up and I realized where I was. And it was so easy after that.' She said, 'It's much easier than you think.'"

I tried to imagine what it would be like to the and to wake up somewhere new, someplace - something - unlike anything I'd ever known before. I tried to imagine its happening to Lona. The notion left me with a strange, uneasy feeling; it was like thinking about eternity.

" 'It's easier than you think,' but, she said, 'I get weary at times. It's the weariness of the soul.' Because, she said, 'I too drag my feet and I realize how much further I have to go.' "

There was that dragging foot again.

"I want to go where there are mountains," Nelda said, and was off on a different subject. For nearly an hour she described other spirits and other circumstances in my life. Finally, toward the end of the reading, she returned to the "lovely lady."

By this time, the room had grown quite dark, and Nelda was lost in the shadows; her voice seemed to come from nowhere.

"It's like a trauma or something that's bothering me, she said. "It's funny here. I get a kind of laziness with this person. They would have been good in the South, where you didn't have to hurry too much. And a restlessness comes in with this, a great deal of it - in the feet. My feet want to go. And I'm having difficulty with my breathing."

As she said this, Nelda began to cough.

I scored her four out of a possible five. Lona's death had obviously been traumatic; she had grown up in the Southwest, was less than enthusiastic about housework, but had lots of energy for skydiving, skiing, and the other things she enjoyed. She had not, however, had any respiratory problem that I knew of.

"Do you have any impression of what she looked like?" I asked, hoping to lead Nelda into something more specific.

"What she looked like? I just get, was she short?"

"Yes."

"Dark hair? Was she vivacious?"

"Very."

"She would have been a good dancer, whether she was or not, because there was grace there. But did she have a heart condition? I have to ask this because I suddenly got a pain right there, okay." She pressed her hand to her chest. "That's why I ask."

Lona had been an excellent dancer, but there was absolutely nothing wrong with her heart.

"I do feel that she went when she was supposed to," Nelda observed, "but she says, 'I'll come back.' I'm getting pain in the back now, back too, with this ..." I recalled that Lona's spinal column had been broken in the accident. Somewhere in the back of my mind, something else was stirring. After a few minutes, it came to me - Joanne's dream, the dream that she'd told me about on the ferry: "I dreamed about Mommy last night. It was her, but her face was all white, like a spirit. And she said, 'I'm going to come back to you.'"

It was an interesting coincidence.

Nelda, her voice now worn to a whisper by the nonstop talking, was winding up the reading. "I don't know if there was any feeling of jealousy there for the person you're married to," she said, "but I feel something in connection there. I can't get her name, I'm sorry."

There was a moment of silence, then Nelda got up and turned on a light, putting an end to the gloomy spell. I thanked her for the reading, and after chatting for a few more minutes, said good-bye.

As I drove home through a cold, on-and-off drizzle, I considered what a remarkable afternoon it had been. Some of the things that Nelda had said I couldn't really assess - without checking further, it was impossible to say whether they were true or not - but much of what she'd said seemed quite accurate. Her remarks about Lona were more than correct; they were poignant. At times, I'd felt sure that I was making contact with Lona once more, not with a story about her, or someone's description of her, but rather with her, the woman I'd known.

Nelda had even mentioned a link between Lona and Julie.

If Lona were alive, I thought, she certainly would have been jealous, not because of me, perhaps, but rather because of Joanne and Nadine. The idea that another woman was raising her daughters would have infuriated her.

As far as I knew, Nelda had made only two clear mistakes. While discussing Lona, she'd said something about coughing and a heart condition, and Lona had been in excellent health. Even so, the performance ranked as a major success. I wondered how much I should tell Julie about the day's events.

Initially, when I was just beginning the research, I had told her nothing. I knew that my writing about Lona would upset her, that she would raise tearful objections, and that I would find it nearly impossible to continue with an already difficult project, so I had said nothing. But eventually the strain of keeping the secret had become unbearable; Julie and I had our disagreements, but we had no secrets. One evening while we were having dinner at an Italian restaurant in Boston's North End, I had told her about the book.

It was as though I'd slapped her.

She sat across the table from me, staring blankly, with a stunned, disbelieving look on her face. Slowly the corners of her lips lifted into a nervous smile, and a few seconds later the tears began to flow - not isolated drops, but two steady streams, which tumbled down her cheeks.

I wanted to explain, to talk away her pain, but it was as impossible, and as thoughtless, as trying to reason with someone who's just been hit by a truck.

"No, no, I'm all right," Julie protested, gasping for air. "I just don't want to talk about it now. I can't." Her eyes pleaded with me to understand.

As the weeks passed, Julie came to accept the book intellectually - she conceded that it might be very interesting, as well as worthwhile - but her emotional reservations remained. In a note to me, she confided, "I hate this book. I am waiting with a spade to bury it."

## Chapter Five

The second reading was scheduled for the very next day, April 10. I would have preferred a brief rest, a few days to let my mind unwind, but arrangements had already been made. I promised myself some sane time once it was over.

It was yet another cold, cloudy day. In New England, the winter frequently passes in week after week of brooding, slate-gray skies, with temperatures hovering near freezing. Winter is a desperate period, the sort of weather that might lead a person to see or hear strange things. As I drove through Boston and headed north on Route 1, I was struck by an irony. Nearly three hundred years before, witches had been hanged in Salem; now I was on my way to Peabody, one town over, to meet a woman who claimed that she could speak with the dead.

Mary McGuire lived in a large old home on a tree-lined street, just half a mile from the sprawl of a suburban shopping center; she was waiting at the door when I pulled up in front of the house.

Mary McGuire was an attractive and thoroughly contemporary young woman, someone who might have stepped from the pages of either the Ladies' Home Journal or Ms. She had short, platinum-white hair, the clearest blue eyes I'd ever seen, and a lively, warm smile; the overall impression she gave was one of happiness. She seemed secretly tickled, as though she'd just heard that she'd won the Massachusetts Lottery.

She showed me into the kitchen, a small cozy room, put on some water, and took the phone off the hook so that we wouldn't be disturbed.

Like Nelda Speers, Mary knew only my name and the fact that I was working on a book. Apparently she was anxious to keep it that way - any details she picked up in conversation might inadvertently creep into the reading, she explained - and so, as soon as my tea was ready, the reading began.

I gave her a watch, a unisex Texas Instruments digital watch that had belonged to Lona, and told her that I'd be particularly interested in hearing anything she might pick up about its owner.

"I was sure you'd come here with something special in mind," she said. "If it's possible, we'll give you what you want. Each person establishes their own criteria for proof. Sometimes we can be efficient, and sometimes, we don't know why, but we can't."

She stood somewhat formally, with her eyes closed, at the other side of the kitchen table. I noticed that she had a nice figure; brown slacks, a yellow blouse, and a brown velour jacket echoed her trim lines. She held the watch in front of her, toying with it idly. Her fingers were long and fine, but the veins on the back of her hands were quite pronounced, as though she'd just finished exercising.

"I don't know who this watch belongs to," she began, "so I don't know when I'll be getting into that vibration; but I do feel a very strong brotherly feeling in talking to you. Perhaps you would recognize someone that would come like a brother."

Well, I thought, here we go again.

Within a matter of minutes, Mary had described someone who might well have been my infant brother and someone else who bore a striking resemblance to my maternal grandfather. She went on to describe other spirits whom I didn't recognize, but then stunned me with a casual, offhand remark.

"I'm also receiving the name of Emily," she said. "I don't know that that will have any special meaning for you, but I'm sensing a young girl that has been drawn to you from spirit in a guiding way."

As far as I could remember, I'd only known two Emilys during my lifetime. One was the five-year-old daughter of a good friend; the other was Emily Fisher, a young writer with whom I'd once worked. A year or so after I'd last seen her, Emily Fisher committed suicide.

A few minutes later, Mary touched on another familiar subject.

"As you go into the August month," she told me, "you're going to feel as though your weight is more balanced, your step is more confident. But I feel right now that you are sort of limping along in a way. I don't know if it's emotionally, spiritually - they're not telling me."

What was going on, I wondered. It wasn't as though I limped all the time. Once or twice a week, in the privacy of my own home, I found myself walking on the outside of my left foot. It wasn't something that a stranger would pick up on.

As Mary read, her pale-blue eyes darted back and forth beneath closed lids like those of a person dreaming. She seemed peaceful, at ease, but at times her brow would furrow, or the tendons in her neck grow taut, or she would cock her head to one side, as though listening to a sound far away. She reminded me of a deer in the forest, completely relaxed and completely alert.

She continued to finger Lona's watch as she talked, moving it back and forth from one hand to the other, but it wasn't until the end of the reading that she mentioned it.

"Did the person who belonged to this, was there a shock to their system concerned with their passing?" she asked. "All dying must be traumatic in a way, but was there trauma involved?"

"Yes, there was," I answered.

"Because I'm picking that up very strongly," she said. "I don't know how long they're gone into spirit, but I don't feel that it's a very long time. There's a mending process that must take place even when the body is discarded, and I feel as though I'm well on my way to being mended. I feel I'm peaceful. I get peaceful - that's the word I want to say. I feel choked up too," she noted, and began to cough as though she really were choking. "I don't know," she faltered. "I don't want to strain in that vibration."

I recalled Nelda Speers' remark about a breathing problem.

"I do, I feel sort of emotional," she went on. "I feel unfortunate, I feel regret, and yet I feel as though I was carried away with the momentum of a wave. I don't know why I would say that." She laughed lightly, as though embarrassed by a poor analogy. "I don't necessarily mean that they passed in the water, but I feel as though it was some type of momentum that was involved. Would you understand why I would say that?" she asked.

"Yes, I would."

"I want to come over to you - some spirit, whether it's this one or another I don't know - and I want to stroke your face." Mary's voice was suddenly soft and loving. "I feel very kind in nature as this spirit is touching me; and if there's one thing I could convey to you, it would be this feeling of peace and calm. I feel the guidance of spirit very strongly around you," she observed. "Whether you feel it or not, I don't know, but I feel that they're guiding you a great deal of the time."

The reading ended rather abruptly a few minutes later. "I find that I'm straining," Mary explained, "so I'm going to let it go."

It had been short and sweet, more provocative than evidential, but interesting nonetheless.

Now that our business was over, Mary fixed another pot of tea, and we sat and talked for a short while. I learned that she was the wife of a police captain, the mother of five children, and a part-time secretary at a local high school. She had been mediumistic since her youth and now served as the pastor of the Swampscott Spiritualist Church. Amazingly, she remained something of a skeptic.

"I'm still scrounging around for confirmation myself," she admitted. "Immortality is a nice concept, and I buy it, but I'm still working on it. I believe it, but I'm still not sure how we can prove it."

She noted that her husband was an unpersuaded atheist.

"I'm not sure if a reading is the most valid method," she suggested. "If I were you, I'd try to do it for myself." -

It was a fascinating possibility, and one that I entertained at length on my way home. The notion of communicating with spirits - of seeing them and hearing them, of having them answer questions about the past and future - appealed for a number of obvious reasons, not the least of which was professional. I imagined interviews with Christ and Lincoln and Lee Harvey Oswald. But the idea was a fiction held together by flaws.

To begin with, I didn't know whether or not such spirits existed. I'd seen a few tantalizing clues, but nothing that qualified as proof. And if they did, I suspected that getting in touch with them wasn't something I could just go out and do, any more than I could just go out and perform a tonsillectomy or play a Chopin Polonaise. Talent, training, and mastering skills were certainly required.

And, I thought, with my luck, even if there were spirits and I could communicate with them, Lincoln

would probably issue a "No comment" or refer me to his press secretary.

No, thanks, I'd continue to obtain my information from ordinary, if less interesting, sources: living people, court documents, medical records, business reports, the public library, AP, and UPI. They might not be able to tell me who was going to win at Pimlico tomorrow, but I was comfortable with them.

That evening, after dinner and after discussing the reading with Julie, I did just that sort of basic, humdrum research.

I went down to my office, and searching in a filing cabinet for a few minutes, found the papers I was looking for.

Shortly after Lona's death, I'd obtained copies of both the death certificate and the autopsy report. It occurred to me that the girls might have a need for them at some time in the future. I considered the possibility of writing about my experience - a magazine piece, perhaps, on what it was like to lose a loved one - in which case also the documents might have been useful.

I'd read the certificate, a sheet of cheery yellow paper that reduced the details of Lona's life to a list of impersonal facts: name, place of death, date of death, social security number, sex, and cause of death: "Multiple Injuries Extreme." But I'd been unable to read the autopsy report, a four-page chronicle of the injuries Lona had received. My loss was too recent. I'd glanced at the front page, realized how grisly the information was, and slipped the report back into its envelope.

Now I sat down at my desk and pulled it out.

Lona had died more than two years previously. My feelings for her had waned or at least become less important, but I still found reading the report difficult, like seeing a bad automobile accident and discovering that the bloody driver is someone you know. I skipped over the first three pages and read only the concluding comments:

"Following gross and microscopic exam, of all organs, cause of death attributed to multiple injuries extremis. It is the opinion of the prosecutor that the presence of an 8" deeply indented abrasion with hyoid fracture is consistent with asphyxiation (entanglement), with impact immediately prior to assured death by strangulation. Each of the following could have caused death: frac. of hyoid with strangulation and asphyxia; transection of spinal cord; broken neck; ruptured heart. Death provisionally listed as accidental pending police investigation."

The report was signed by a Dr. Joseph M. DiLorenzo, the chief medical examiner for Burlington County, New Jersey.

I could barely believe my eyes. I was no doctor and I was unfamiliar with some of the language - I'd never heard of a hyoid fracture and was uncertain what and where a hyoid was - but two of the phrases stood out as though written in neon:

"Ruptured heart."

"Death by strangulation."

I'd been told about Lona's spine, but no one had mentioned the other injuries. I thought about the fact that both of the mediums had picked up a problem with breathing.

"I feel choked up," Mary McGuire had said.

"I'm having difficulty with my breathing," Nelda Speers had remarked.

Both had begun to cough while describing the problem.

I recalled Nelda's uninformed question, "But did she have a heart condition? I have to ask this because I suddenly got a pain right there."

I'd thought that she'd struck out twice, but it now appeared that Nelda was batting .500.

It was a performance, a run of luck, a series of coincidences, that defied analysis or statistics. If one thought about it for more than a short while, one's brain began to go numb, to feel like cotton batting. It was not a pleasant sensation. I put the report away.

Fortunately there were other matters that required my attention. An article that another writer and I had recently worked on - the story of a mother-and-son murder team - now seemed to be turning into a book, and I was already researching another magazine piece. Talking with mediums had been pleasant and intriguing, but at the moment the prospect of dealing with attorneys, judges, and chiefs of police was much more appealing. I decided to spend a few days on the other projects.

Unfortunately while it was possible to control the days, it was less easy to regulate the nights.

The very next day, the paranormal - or at the very least, the abnormal - intruded again.

My sleep was filled with dreams, bizarre episodes which, though interesting, were no more strange than most dreams. It wasn't until a short while before I awoke that something unusual happened. At the time, I wasn't dreaming - there were no visual impressions - but suddenly I heard someone speak to me. The voice was a man's, but unnaturally flat and even, as precise and nearly as colorless as that of a computer.

"Like a family, he struggles with her, remains with her, stays with her through time," the voice said.

As soon as I heard the words, my mind seemed to splinter, to begin operating on several different levels simultaneously. I realized that I wasn't awake and that this was not, therefore, a normal experience. I knew that the voice did not belong to some other person in my bedroom. It seemed to come from inside me, but was separate and different from my own mental processes. I heard it rather



than thought it. And yet another part of my mind was listening to and evaluating the words, in much the same way that I might have interpreted poetry.

My first thought was that the words referred to the relationship between men and women, the ongoing, love-and-hate battle of the sexes; my second thought was that they referred specifically to Lona and me.

The voice spoke again, but this time the words slipped through my memory and away. I became concerned that I was going to forget everything I'd heard, and consciously tried to wake up, but the voice interrupted my struggle.

"Don't you want me to tell you any more?" it asked, apparently disturbed by my attempt to escape.

I was startled, but managed a reply. "Yes, but I'm afraid of forgetting," I said.

I awoke, turned on the light, and finding a pen and piece of paper, jotted down some notes about the experience. As soon as I lay down, I was asleep again. The voice, or whatever it was, was waiting.

"She was God's gift to you through man," it told me.

This time, I had no first or second thoughts; I strongly felt that the message referred to Lona.

"She went home to inner lake," the voice explained.

The language was rather flowery - I would have preferred it a bit more clinical and therefore less susceptible to subjective influence - but I had no doubts about its meaning. Lona had died. She had returned to some primal source, to some inner Wellspring of her own being. But that was not a fact and it was not, by the wildest stretch of anyone's imagination, evidential. It was merely my interpretation of what seemed to be someone else's poetry. And even that was uncertain. It could just have been my own.

A short while later, I awoke for good.

It was hard to know what to make of the experience. It contained a number of unique elements - the tone of the voice, the ornate use of language, the conscious quality of the episode - but they did not add up to anything substantial. They were provocative, but they weren't proof. It was a frustrating situation. Something had happened that I found intriguing and compelling but that carried no weight within a physical context, the world. It happened again the very next evening.

Again, it occurred while I was sleeping. At some point I suddenly realized that I was not awake, but rather I was dreaming and able to control my surroundings - to observe them, to raise questions about them, to manipulate them physically. There seemed to be little difference between such a dream and the normal waking state. The dream was long and involved, containing a number of unrelated sequences, but the simplest proved the most interesting.

In it, I was handed an apple. I was distinctly aware of the bright color of the fruit and took it in my hand, testing the experience further. I attempted to squeeze it and found that I could feel it. It had substance, it seemed as hard as a healthy Stayman Winesap. I did not recall ever feeling something in a dream in quite this way. I raised the apple to my nose and inhaled; I could smell the sweet, musty scent of its dry skin. I conducted my final test. I bit into the apple and felt its crisp flesh break before my teeth.

If anything, the experience was more intense than in real life. It was real for me, but real for no one else. Anyone entering my bedroom at that moment would have seen me, lying asleep, the blankets pulled up over my head. They would have seen no apple, and if I were to have told them about my dream, would have found it as empty as most other people's dreams generally seem. But it moved me enough to turn to the books again, and in *Life Without Death* by Dr. Nils O. Jacobson, a Swedish psychiatrist, I found a reference to something known as a lucid dream.

"A special group of dreams has caught the attention of numerous parapsychologists in recent years," Jacobson writes. "These are known as lucid dreams. A dream is called lucid not because its visual impression is unusually clear ... but rather because, during the dream, the dreamer is conscious of the fact that he is dreaming. This awareness is closest to an intellectual land. What is fascinating is that the dreamer of a lucid dream ... achieves a certain degree of control over the dream's further development and it appears possible to develop this control through practice. Lucid dreams are usually also characterized by the fact that they are noticeably easier to recall than ordinary dreams."

Later, Jacobson notes that paranormal experiences are more likely to occur during such a dream.

I had never heard of a lucid dream, but apparently I was having them. I recalled having had several during the months immediately after Lona and I had first separated. I had found them fascinating, and as I tended to do whenever confronted with something unique, had jotted down some notes about them, but had never felt that they were anything other than the bizarre meander-ings of my subconscious mind. Now, I wondered.

Having dreams that in many ways seemed as real as the waking world was a vaguely disorienting experience. Such dreams were harder to shake, harder to blot from one's mind as one returned to the ordinary details of everyday living. Fortunately I had very mundane matters to take me away from fantasy: the magazine article that I was researching and the mother-and-son book that was taking shape. We were also coming up to the girls' Easter vacation, which provided me with an opportunity to visit my parents in New Jersey.

We spent the holiday and part of the following week with them. It was a wonderful, relaxing time, a return to the normalcy and sanity of childhood. There were no arguments with Julie, no visits from supernatural beings. The vacation was all pleasant and perfectly natural: going to church with my mother and father, Easter baskets for the girls, lots of my mother's desserts for me. It was a retreat from the demands of an at times demanding home life and from what was fast becoming a perplexing and powerful encounter with the paranormal. I did not question the purpose of the pleasure or wonder whether it was part of some greater scheme. But in retrospect, it seemed to have been a providential lull before the storm, a period of time in which to prepare for the ordeal to come. I had no idea that we

were all going to be inundated with the powers of the dream, the powers of the night, that we were going to find ourselves questioning the difference between the real and the spirit worlds.

If anyone had told me that I'd soon be wondering whether or not the spirit world really existed, I would have imagined that he was insane, but within months I found myself desperately trying to hang onto my old objective, down-to-earth view of things. Like a reporter refusing to give up his objectivity, his most prized possession, I was unwilling to make this concession. I would listen to the story, weigh it, and decide for myself, but I wasn't about to discard my powers of reason no matter how fascinating the tale. It was still going to be judged by rational criteria.

We returned to Massachusetts in mid-April, and I returned to the business of earning a living. This was the last time in a very long while that we were able to live without the specter of the supernatural hovering over our heads.

On the evening of April 24, 1979, Julie, the girls, and I went out to dinner. During the course of the meal, the subject of dreams came up, and we talked about them for a while. The girls, I was pleased to hear, had had no unusual dreams, lucid or otherwise. I intended to keep the details of my own experiences a secret; I didn't want them interfering with my daughters' thoughts or their lives. Interestingly Nadine tended to remember her dreams, she told me, but Joanne was more likely to forget hers or to dismiss them as unimportant.

That evening, when we returned home, I tucked the girls in for the night. Nadine wasn't any different from usual - just a little difficult to coax between the blankets. Joanne, on the other hand, seemed to have a little trouble in unwinding. Pulling the covers up beneath her chin, I noticed that she seemed a bit disturbed, as though something was weighing on her mind. I shut off the lights and wished her pleasant dreams. I was halfway out the door when I heard her say, "Daddy, come back."

There was a note of urgency in her voice that I responded to immediately. As when one of the girls hurt herself and cried out, I didn't stop to reason, I went to her.

I turned the light on and went to the side of her bed.

"Daddy, I'm spooked," she said.

Her face told me that she wasn't making it up. Joanne liked to play games with me and she was an accomplished actress, but the fear on her face was for real. I had no doubts about that.

"What are you afraid of?" I asked her.

"I'm spooked," she said. "It feels just like it did the night that Mommy died. I felt it as soon as I came into my bedroom tonight. It feels like the air is heavy, as though there's something here. I felt the same thing the night that Bonnie died."

Bonnie was a lovely collie that Joanne had owned and with whom she had carried on a close, confidential relationship. That dog had known more about Joanne and her problems than anyone else

in the world. It had been struck and killed by a car the previous summer.

"My head feels all sort of numb," she explained.

I sat down beside her, stroked her head, and tried to reassure her. We talked about her mother's death, and I tried to share a little of what I knew about the various beliefs of certain religions about life and death. I told her about the traditional Christian concept of heaven and hell as well as about the more mystical opinions of the Spiritualists. She seemed to find just talking about the notion of a hereafter more than enough to take the edge off of her concern.

She told me about her feelings for her mother. She said that she had loved her mother very much and that occasionally she cried about losing her. She said that sometimes, when she was outside in the rain, she pretended that the drops of water running down her face were, in fact, tears that she shed for her mother. This, she said, was a "sacrifice" for her mother, an indication of how much her mother had meant to her. A million million tears for Lona. I thought that it was a beautiful analogy, a beautiful thought.

Finally Joanne seemed to quiet down, and I left her by herself in the bedroom. She insisted, though, that I leave the door open a bit. She was pleased by the thought that her mother might be present, but wasn't about to be left alone with her or with anything else that she couldn't see and understand completely.

I went back to the living room to do a little work.

I was making some notes about the mother-and-son interviews that I'd been conducting with the two murderers in their respective prisons. As I jotted my observations down, the radio played in the background. The first song was the Beatles' "Let It Be." This was a song I associated strongly with Lona. When we were first separated, I had given her a copy of the sheet music, a not-so-subtle suggestion that she should once more let our relationship exist. The tactic hadn't worked, but ever since then I had thought of her whenever I heard the music.

The very next song had something to do with rain. "I do all my crying in the rain. No one knows my tears from the rain." I heard the lyrics with a corner of my consciousness, listening with one ear as I was making the notes. Again I was forced to think of Lona; the similarity between the lyrics and what Joanne had just told me was too real to be ignored. At that moment, suddenly, unexpectedly, there was a loud crash in one of the bedrooms. I had no idea what it could be, but it jolted me from the task at hand, and I sprinted down the hall, anxious to find out what had happened.

My first thought was of Joanne. I considered that she might have gotten out of bed, and still upset by the earlier incident, accidentally bumped into something on the way to the bathroom. I ducked into her room, but the light was still out, and she was sleeping peacefully. There was nothing on the floor or anywhere else in the room that might have slipped and fallen and produced the noise. I turned and stepped into Nadine's bedroom.

As soon as I walked through the door, the scent hit me. It was an unexpected odor, the smell of a

perfume, sweet but light, not so strong as to make me wince, a pleasant but pervasive presence of intimate potency. I recognized it immediately; it was Windsong, Lona's favorite perfume. I hadn't smelled it since I'd last seen her. Now, for no apparent reason, the room was rilled with it.

I glanced around the room, checking to make certain that everything was all right. Nadine was sound asleep, oblivious to the noise that I'd heard so clearly. She was curled up in the dark, a bedbug nestling inside a warm cocoon of covers. I checked the rest of the room. Nothing was out of place, nothing out of order. Everything was exactly where it belonged. Nothing explained the crash that had jarred me from my work in the living room. I stood there, wondering what to make of what was happening.

I found myself thinking that Lona might, in fact, be present. Joanne's "spooking" might have been something more than the ravings of a little girl's imagination. I felt that the idea was unacceptable, that there was nothing I had ever seen or heard that strongly suggested - suggested in a way that was not subject to disagreement and discussion, to eventual explainings away - that life persisted beyond the grave. I wasn't about to indulge such a notion idly. But as I stood there in the dark, I spoke to her mentally in a purely experimental way. "Lona?" I said.

There was an instant response. As soon as I said her name, my body began to tingle with a cold electricity, the same sensation as I had felt the night that I'd been awakened from my sleep by the bizarre antics of my body. It coursed down the length of me like ice water being poured over my skin. I felt it most in my head and limbs, but it was present in the rest of me as well. It was a lovely sensation, a pleasant tingle as invigorating as a slap of aftershave cologne, but suffusing every cell of me, it seemed. I responded to the stimulus automatically. "I know, I know," I said, as though acknowledging Lona's presence.

I knew that the room was empty, but somewhere inside of me something was responding as though she was present. Yet the last thing that I wanted was to find out that Lona still had plans for me, still had a part to play in my life. It was enough to have known her, to have loved and lost her, but I had no desire to keep things going with a ghost.

But as soon as I said, "I know," the sensations intensified tremendously, as though the words gave new power, new energy, to the sensations, as though a fresh jolt of electricity had been administered to my body. I stood there, exploring and enjoying the strange feelings, waiting to see what would happen next. The sensations built slowly to a mild climax and then faded, only to begin building again. It was like being washed by the waves of a frigid ocean, one wave lapping one's senses, then receding, only to be followed by the next. I might have lingered longer, but Nadine awoke and saw me standing there. "Daddy, it's loud," she said. "The music?" I asked.

"Yes," she told me, then grew curious about why I was in her room to begin with. "What do you want?"

"I was just looking in to see if you were okay," I answered, "and you are - you're great. Good night, sweetheart."

I left the room and returned to the living room, reluctant to give up this experience\* so quickly. I lay

down in the center of the floor, and remembering what I could of what Irene Vitello and the other mediums had had to say about what it was like to work as a medium, tried to follow their instructions. I lay quietly, tried to empty my mind of all thought and become receptive to whatever might occur. It seemed like an insane game, but Julie and the girls were in bed, and so there was no reason for embarrassment. And whether or not I was convinced, something had happened in Nadine's room.

"Lona," I said to myself, seeing if what had worked earlier would work again. "Lona, touch me." I didn't have to wait very long. The familiar surge of electricity coursed through me as though the touch that I'd requested was tingling through me. I waited for the pleasant power to drain from my body, but at the same time was reluctant to let it go; it was a most persuasive reason for me to open myself to whatever was happening, for me to let go entirely and enjoy the overpowering sensations.

But I was also anxious to see whether these potent sensations were only my own subconscious precipitating pleasurable feelings or whether they were something real, something that existed in a lucid, objective world. I didn't want to pander to my own emotions at the expense of my intelligence, and at the expense of the needs of my objective nature to analyze and evaluate even my own senses' operations and conclusions.

"Touch me again," I said.

Again there was an immediate but less noticeable response, as though the touch that I was feeling was less intense, less pervasive in scope, but it was still perceptible. I waited for a while, then repeated my request. "Please," I added. "Hold me closer, please."

There was a faint response, but nothing very powerful or prolonged.

"Help me," I asked, nearly automatically, as though the part of me that had first spoken Lona's name in Nadine's bedroom was once more taking matters into its own hands. I experienced the same multiple functioning of the brain that I had noted in my encounter with the voice of my dreams. I was puzzled by it, but before I could resist, the sensations I was feeling pounded me into submission.

I felt the waves of ether wafting along my body, chilling and pleasantly anesthetizing my flesh, the finely honed edge of the powers having their way with the very heart of me. My mind was a jumble of contradictions. Here I was, lying in the middle of my own living room, with nothing other than the feeling of the carpet beneath me and the gentle pressure of the air around me to stir my senses, and, incredibly, I found myself feeling a major assault on my every cell.

It made no sense, but seemed to be happening. I found myself telling myself to relax and enjoy the show, but another part of me resisted. I was not about to let the sensation dominate my objective standards. I had to rise to the occasion of this sensory insurrection and find a way to channel the energy into more reasonable modes of behavior. It wasn't the sensations themselves that I objected to, but rather their mindless quality. As I lay there, though, yet other phenomena began to occur. It was all I could do to hang on and watch.

I noticed that beneath my closed eyelids patterns of light began to appear. I saw a vast black panorama

- what I expected to see - but soon I noticed small flickers of blue and white light twinkling in front of this inky backdrop. It was as though I'd suddenly been cast out into the night and was watching the evening's stars. It was a beautiful sight, but not one I was used to seeing when I closed my eyes. At the same time, I found that the muscles of my face were beginning to constrict unnaturally. The muscles in my forehead were knitting into tight furrows, the eyelids tightening as though they were the fingers of a fist. I waited for them to relax, to resume their normal state, but instead they constricted more tightly. I found myself locked into a black velvet world, a world devoid of inputs, a world that was seemingly being fashioned inside me.

I was amazed by the intensity of the experience. I had never felt anything quite so compelling, and yet I knew that nothing was happening. No one was stroking my body, no one touching my soul, no one was trying to make contact with me in this novel way. I was simply indulging my own subconscious and a higher than average imagination. In the past, my imagination had worked for me, but now it seemed to be setting out on it's own

The 'experience continued for several minutes then ebbed like a fit of passion that has reached its natural conclusion. The muscles of my face relaxed, releasing their hold on my eyes, and the image behind the lids changed into the normal flesh-colored tone of light passing through my closed eyelids. It had been one of the most interesting, if insane, experiences of my life.

But, I thought, I'd leave the mystical experiences to the mediums and the LSD prophets, to the priests and philosophers of society; I was a journalist and inclined to more ordinary matters. It was what I knew, not what I felt, that mattered.

## Chapter Six

This wasn't what I'd planned to have happen when I began to look into the possibility that Lona had survived her fatal fall in some way. It seemed then that the most reasonable explanation for my experiences was that I wanted to convince myself that everything does not come to an inglorious end. That seemed like the most logical explanation, but it wasn't the truth. In actuality, I had been frightened by the prospect of finding that there wouldn't be any phenomena worthy of mention, that I was engaged in a wild goose chase which would end very precipitately, since there was nothing to be found. I needed to know that my way of looking at life was objective, was rooted in reality; without that, all my skills and talent were for naught. The mere thought of finding experiences that I could not explain, could not even understand, was completely unacceptable.

Joanne was less disturbed by such possibilities. The day after my rather intriguing encounter with something that seemed to respond to my thoughts of Lona, Joanne mentioned that she had been reassured by our little talk, that she was no longer afraid that her mother might visit her. I was pleased to hear that she was no longer "spooked," but was disturbed by her not-so-critical acceptance of such groundless beliefs. She said that she was not opposed to being touched by her mother, but wasn't prepared to feel anything that might startle her. I told her that, if her mother did in fact still exist and if she chose to visit her, I was sure she would do nothing that would frighten her daughter. I felt that no mother, whether living or dead, would be likely to jeopardize the safety or security of her baby.

During the coming weeks, I continued to work on my other projects, conducting interviews, transcribing notes, making additional visits to the two state prisons where the mother and son murderers were being held. It was a busy and rewarding time. The magazine article was nearly done, and a publisher was almost certainly interested in the book. But even when I was most absorbed by the other responsibilities, I found my mind wandering back to that evening when I'd felt such strange feelings surging through my body. I couldn't keep from wondering what had been going on then, what had really taken place.

Unfortunately the questions kept coming up unanswered. I had no more idea what had transpired now, two weeks after the incident, than I had then. Finally my curiosity got the better of me. I decided to try to recreate the situation, to experiment with the possibility of resuming the interrupted journey into my subconscious or whatever I had touched that evening. On the morning of May 6, I went down to my office to see if these phenomena could be turned on and off or whether they were a once-in-a-lifetime fluke, an accident of nerves, imagination, and chemistry not likely to be repeated.

It was nearly one o'clock in the morning when I sat down on the small bed placed in one corner of the room. I had little hope that I'd have any success in duplicating the events of the other evening, but thought that something might occur. Earlier in the day, while transcribing notes, I had noticed several slight but perceptible chills sifting down through my body, like ice water dripping through a hole in the roof of my skull. I had noticed them, mentally observed them, and compared them to the sensations of the other occasions. I hadn't explored them though, being too tied up in the mundane. It had occurred to me, however, that most of the madness was gone, that only a few trickles of its cold substance remained. Now, however, I was going exploring once more, letting myself entertain the notion, if only for a moment, that there was more out there - more down here in my basement, as well - than I was able to slide under a microscope.



The lights were on in the basement, and I wasn't about to turn them off. I would go just so far in toying with the supernatural. I might momentarily admit to the possibility of survival for a chance to test the hypothesis, but I wasn't going to invest in tea leaves or crystal balls or dark, dismal surroundings. If spirits wanted to see me, they'd have to see me on my own terms.

I lay down on the bed, closed my eyes, and attempted to empty my mind of all conscious thought, to stop the flow of words and images through the mental maze of my inner landscape. I had positioned a tape recorder nearby to record any observations I had to make, but suspected that I was going to wind up with a largely blank tape.

After a few minutes, I had pretty much managed to clear my mind. I had put it on hold and was drifting pleasantly, not much aware of anything other than the pleasantness of resting. I wondered whether this was all that was in store, if I was merely going to slip off into a peaceful sleep. This was not an unappealing idea, but the basement was not my usual place of rest.

My bed upstairs was much more comfortable, and it came equipped with Julie.

Finally I tired of waiting on the unknown. I decided to take matters into my own hands.

"Are you still here?" I asked.

There was an immediate response, a slight chill that flickered across my shoulders and down my neck, as though someone had pulled a light scarf off of my body. I wasted no time in detailing the sensation to the tape recorder. I spoke to the recorder much like a pathologist might in performing an autopsy, describing what was happening as dispassionately and as disinterestedly as possible. It was an exercise in observation and note-taking, two tasks that I was proficient at.

"I feel a faint chill across my shoulders and neck," the tape recorder recorded. The tape wound away, as I continued to describe the fluctuating impressions that I began to receive. At times, it recorded nothing but silence for minutes on end, but then it would distill hundreds of hurried words into a few inches of mylar.

"I'm getting the same faint rush, this time in my legs and arms and back and neck, not as strong as the first time this evening." The tape coiled and uncoiled on the cartridge's two spools, impersonally preserving my observations of what was happening. The impressions grew increasingly stronger, increasingly disconcerting. It became harder and harder to dismiss them, to write them off as the result of a draft or of the flare of a passing automobile's headlights. I couldn't believe that my subconscious was responsible for what I was feeling. I'd never in my life had an imagination this good.

"I am here for you to use. I am here for you to communicate through," I noted mentally, thinking that I could coax the activity forward in the same way as such comments had done the other evening. Each time I did, the phenomena intensified. I felt like someone exploring a nightmare, coolly observing its forms and colors and happenings in order to report to those who were still awake.

"I have a very strong thrill, a very strong chill ... a very strong, pervasive chill in the whole body, a very pleasant feeling - a sort of hypnotic sort of, like an anesthetic. I see sort of a rolling, boiling mist - dark purple and sort of yellow." Beneath my closed eyelids, carpets of frothy color unrolled and dissolved, only to be replaced by other vibrant patches of lovely hues. "Uhummm, there's quivering in my head," I noted. The quivering was similar to the unexpected contortions of the other evening. "My left eyelid is beginning to quiver. The corner of the eye is really vibrating. It's pulling back toward the left side of my face. Both eyes are beginning to quiver. The muscles are contracting, the eyelids ... the muscles at both sides, the sides of the eye, are constricting. They're pulling up. The upper part of my mouth is being lifted by constriction of the muscles. The muscles are very tight now; the muscles must be quite constricted."

I felt as though my head were being manipulated by a number of finely tuned vises, the musculature being pushed this way and that, constricted and extended without any conscious effort on my part. It was as though unseen hands were massaging my flesh into what must be ludicrous positions. I was concerned that this was happening - it was not a pleasant or easily overlooked development - but I felt that I was still in control of it, that at any moment I could shut down this face-making show. I had only to say "No," to reassert my mastery of mind and body, in order to take the steering wheel back from whatever was guiding it now. I felt that strongly; but I was still a bit wary because I did not know it. My feeling was founded on faith.

"The muscles are painfully tight," the tape recorder heard me say. "It's very black where I'm at, very peaceful." My voice dragged out the word, fleshing out the pleasant feeling. "Visual impressions like a light show, black with whirls of light color, rippling, changing very liquid colors, blue turned to green against a field of black." It was the first time that I'd seen the two colors together during this episode, but it wasn't going to be the last. During the coming months, the image of blue and green lights mingling, melding, and separating again would become as familiar as the shape of my own hands. "Many colors against a field of black, very bright colors, really lovely colors. ... A chill. I feel like a child in kindergarten learning the ABCs."

I had Lona's watch with me, thinking that I might give psychometry a try. It hadn't looked very difficult when Irene Vitello and Mary McGuire had done it. They'd merely held the item in their hands and tossed it back and forth between their fingers. The one difference was that they were allegedly psychic, while I was not, but given the fact that it didn't cost anything extra, I thought it was worth a try.

I picked up Lona's watch and fingered its shape.

"As I rub it, I get a strong chill," I said. "And I'm seeing blue."

For no obvious reason, I suddenly found myself speaking to Lona. "Lona?" I asked, like a person who has just wandered into a dark room and wonders if someone is there. As soon as I said her name, there was an overpowering sensation of cold throughout my body.

"Oh, a very strong chill," I remarked, my words sounding more like a groan than speech. "My eyes are tightening up again. I'm seeing black, blue-black. Lona, is this you?" I asked. The question was insane,

rooted in nothing substantial, but I could not deny it. I heard no answer, but my whole being resounded with the response.

"The upper half of my body is catatonic," I gasped, "with this pleasant electricity. And it's very black, with this neon blue strung through it Oh, my eyes are wincing up, and the side of my face, my whole upper face is distorted, and I hear rushing in my ears like wind. An echo in my ear. It sounded like wind coming down a tunnel. And all, every part of my body feels like it's" - I paused, considering how to describe exactly what I felt - "like it's somewhere else," I said.

"Oh, this rushing!" I enthused, carried away by the intoxicating sensations. "Eye muscles relaxed, but now they're doing their number again, their dance again. They wrinkle up on the sides completely uncontrollably and sort of pull the top half of my face up in a strange - it would be a smile, except that it's not. It's distorting my mouth and changing the sound of my voice." The tape recorder bore silent witness to the contortions and to the strangled syllables.

I continued to handle the watch, and as I did, the impressions changed.

"I'm sort of feeling it... and I can sense her wrist, and it's as though I have my hand around her wrist, as though I'm holding her hand." I knew that Lona was dead and gone, knew that I would never touch her again, but I seemed to be experiencing a strong memory of what it was like to hold her hand in mine. It was a nice, intimate souvenir of our relationship. "I'm sort of seeing the watch with my fingers; I can see it in my mind's eye. I can see its edges and its surface, its straps."

Finally I set the watch aside and attempted to relax a bit. I was not used to this sort of workout. The sensations slowly subsided, like water gradually returning to rest after a storm, but then, as though sensing the approach of another low front, the waters began to turn choppy once more.

"On the right side of the head, there's a faint numbness, a faint pain - on the front right side of my head." My voice reflected my disbelief. I was lying on my back on a comfortable, if somewhat well-worn bed, in a quiet, well-ventilated room. It was the middle of the night, and there were few cars passing by outside. My family was asleep. In short, there was no reason why I should be feeling anything but groggy. Instead I was feeling a strange pain on the right side of my head, a part of me that was actually affected by nothing but air.

"There's a sudden - I'm seeing green, blue, and green, and blue again, and green again, and blue." It was as though a flickering green-and-blue pinwheel were spinning slowly in the midst of a midnight haze; the colors appeared and disappeared, only to reappear again. "And there's a sharp pain down the right side of my head," I suddenly cried out. "It feels like someone has struck me with something on the right side of my head. It's as though the right part of my head might have been smashed in with a rock or something."

I wondered if this might be a migraine, but discounted that possibility. I had never before in my life had one, and there seemed little reason for one to pounce upon me now.

"The right side of my head feels very ... numb, damaged; it feels pushed in, from the bottom of the

right eye up to the hairline. It feels as though that whole side of my face is pushed in, caved in." I was very disturbed by the sensation and debated whether I'd proceeded too far. Perhaps I was no longer in control of the situation.

"The pain on the right side of my face seems to be burrowing a bit deeper into my head. I have this mental image of a head which is all caved in on the right side, the upper right-hand side. It's as though somebody took a rock or a mallet and smashed it in."

In my mind's eye, I saw what I sensed: a face with a large, hemispherical depression on the right side. It was a bizarre and terrifying image, an impossible way for a face to be ... and live. I tried to drive it from my thoughts, but the pressure, the intense pain, persisted. I was no longer in charge of this performance. "I hope it isn't Lona's face," I prayed. "Lona, was your head pushed in that way?" I asked. Immediately I was convulsed with some of the strongest chills of the entire evening. I was breathless before the onslaught and could do nothing but sigh at the exquisite sensations that swept into the center of me, filled the container of my body with cold wonder. It was similar to, but in a way better than, sex - a long, excruciatingly drawn-out note played on a sensual violin.

"An overpowering chill, completely filling my body, all of my body - breathtaking - absolutely breathtaking."

If this was Lona's way of answering Yes, I intended to ask a lot of questions that could be answered affirmatively. But at the same time I was frightened and confused, frightened by the unexplained pains that had punctuated the evening, and confused by their inexplicableness, by the sheer irrationality of the entire ordeal. I wanted to end it, to call a halt to the proceedings. I needed to return to the normal.

"I'm going to say good night now," I ventured, hoping that was agreeable to my subconscious, to my imagination, to whatever was orchestrating this show. "Would you say good night to me?"

The chills disappeared, bringing me back toward the real world, and the visual impressions drifted away like guests departing a party. I was being abandoned by these unfamiliar feelings, left behind to resume a rational, predictable existence, an existence in which there were causes and effects, beginnings and ends, questions and, wonderfully, answers. At that moment, it was a destination that I devoutly desired.

But before I was safe within the soft security blanket of my explanations, the episode caught up with me, wrung me once more within the fist of its incongruities.

"It's like being wrapped in someone's embrace," I grimaced, feeling myself crushed within a strong field of pressure. "It's like being held very tightly in someone's arms. It's like the way I squeeze the girls good night, the way I hug them good night... Good night," I murmured, like a person weak with gratitude.

My eyes, which had been tightly closed for more than thirty minutes, began to relax. The eyelids loosened like curtains ruffled by a breeze and began to flicker open automatically. I watched as they trembled, opened in little fitful movements, slowly unveiling the room. I saw the beams above my

head, the walls, the columns - all seemed brighter, more vivid than I'd ever seen them before. The colors were much more intense, despite the fact that they were illuminated by a single hundred-watt bulb.

The beams above my head glowed like neon tubes, blushing with a gold phosphorescence. I found this curious, but wrote it off to the fact that my nervous system had just been through a trial. I wasn't surprised that my neurons were still in shock. Slowly my senses - my impressions of the room - returned to normal.

I switched off the tape recorder, turned out the light, and went upstairs to the bathroom; I was in need of a toilet and a cold shower in that order. I wanted to wash all the experience away, to strip the strangeness from me. I was not comfortable with sights and sensations that had no perceptible cause and had no place in my life.

As I stood in front of the mirror, I wondered at what had happened. My face was gaunt, tired, a few years older than it had been earlier in the evening. I looked like a man who had gone without sleep for several days. I stood there, amazed by my reflection, still feeling that unreasonable pressure on the right side of my head - it had still not gone away. As I slipped into bed beside Julie, it was hanging on like a bad cold, reluctant to let go, to let me rest in peace. I drifted off to sleep gratefully, anxious to pull the plug on this overeventful day. I had no desire at all to analyze what had transpired, to sit down and plot its erratic course. I wanted only to escape it, to shake off its mind-numbing effect. I wanted to rest from it, to hide in sleep.

The last thing I thought before I slipped beneath the shroud of sleep was, "Take this pain away."

I seemed to be carrying someone else's scar, someone else's wound, on the right side of my head.

The following day was a Sunday, and I welcomed the opportunity to relax with my family in the sun for a day. I went to the basement only once during the course of the day, but when I did, it seemed a strange place, a place with pleasant but puzzling mysteries residing there. I felt as though the room itself had taken on some of the attributes of my evening there, as though it had somehow moved closer to the world of my momentary mistaken view of life, but I was only imagining, I knew. I was creating spooks of my own to populate this place when the only spooks inhabiting it were the spiders that wove their webs in the window in front of my desk. There was nothing here but sunlight and insects. Yet I wasn't so sure that what I'd experienced had been so empty, so devoid of other peculiar creatures, not unlike the many-winged things that thrashed in the webs in their final agonies, but invisible, unseen by any eye other than that inside my head.

Having other work to do was a blessing, I retreated to it as a drowning man retreats to the safety of a lifeguard pulling him to shore. I spent several days caught up in the matter-of-fact business of compiling my notes about the mother and son murderers. Unfortunately, my idyll with the mundane couldn't last forever. I'd scheduled an interview with a medium whom I'd heard of, and wasn't about to cancel it. I had spent several weeks trying to pin Lillian Ventura down. I had heard about her from several individuals, all of whom seemed to regard her highly. But when I'd phoned her, she'd told me that she'd recently been involved in an automobile accident and needed some time to recuperate. I

wondered why someone who was allegedly a medium would have been involved in an accident to begin with. Someone with the ability to speak with spirits and tell the future allowing herself to be seriously injured in an accident seemed a most unlikely paradox. I wasn't about to trust such a person. I got enough bad advice from friends; I didn't need to solicit it from persons on the other side of the grave. It wasn't my cup of chowder.

When I finally showed up on her doorstep on that Wednesday, I found her much as I had anticipated before my first meeting with a medium.

Lillian was a middle-aged woman with dark-brown hair swept to the back of her head, a not unpleasant-looking person, but with an air of dark melancholy about her. She seemed much like the gypsy woman with tea leaves and crystal ball that I'd envisioned; she had no crystal ball, but a cup of coffee was constantly in front of her. Her fingers were long and lean and marbled with prominent veins, which seemed to stalk her fingertips like snakes hunting for their dinner. I saw that she wasn't about to tell me anything I didn't already know; she didn't have enough sense even to take the cold liquids from the tabletop where they'd spilled.

Her house was as complicated and strangely disorganized as she was. In adjoining rooms there were other people who seemed to be no relation but who wandered in and out as though they were. I suspected that this was something of a crash pad for the elderly ill. There was one old man with a walker, who shuffled through the rooms like a miser from a Dickens tale, and another, darker man, who seemed to be the local jack-of-all-trades. While I waited to speak with Lillian, he was working on several household repair projects at once. I was sitting in the kitchen, a small, efficient room with a green Congoleum floor and light wood paneling. There was a series of plaques on the walls, little plaster thatches that parroted such forgettable messages as, "Swap a smile, trade some cheer," "You don't have to be crazy to work here, but it helps," and "Let's be happy while we're here." Lillian must have furnished her home at a firemen's summer carnival.

Lillian herself seemed to be the lone survivor of an explosion in a bargain basement. Her face was set off by one pair of bone-rimmed glasses, while yet another hung from the chain around her neck. Her hands were a carnival of silver rings, the only jewelry she wore. Her husband was a tall, hulking individual, who seemed most at home in work pants and an undershirt. I had nothing against him or his wife, but their taste left a little to be desired.

Lillian wasted little time with formalities or pleasantries. She seemed ready to get down to business as soon as I made my little presentation. I was writing a book, I explained, and wanted to sit with her for a reading. I'd already mentioned this on the phone, but she seemed to have forgotten. It wasn't the only thing that she'd forget. Lillian seemed to have perfected an ability to listen to the conversations of those around her selectively. She heard only what she wanted to hear. The rest was effectively blocked out, as though she sometimes clapped her hands to her ears to keep from learning things that had no importance to her. I later learned that she was concerned lest she learn things about a person that might influence her readings, might somehow creep into her thoughts during the proceedings. I would have been somewhat skeptical then, though, if she'd told me that the less she knew about a person, the more she'd be able to tell him. It was a seeming reversal of the traditional formula of cause and effect; in this case, the less that went in, the more came out.

We sat down at the kitchen table opposite each other and began the reading. My trusty tape recorder turned on its spools in front of me, recording our every word. I wasn't about to trust my notepad with the thousands of words that Lillian would spill during the coming hour. My pen was fine for noting details about the surroundings and the highlights of what was being said, but only a tape could possibly recover every word of the afternoon. I switched it on and waited for Lillian to perform. I had no doubts that this frowsy lady with the tight slacks and open-throated blouse was not going to prove to be another Irene Vitello or Nelda Speers.

Lillian started as though she were a swimmer leaping into a pool; she jumped, and it was on - the race with words had begun. She spoke as though she were possessed, the words rattling out of her mouth like bubblegum dropping out of a penny gumball machine with a nervous breakdown. It was all that I could do to keep up with Lillian aurally, let alone with my hands and pen. I looked for something to do with them, not used to sitting empty-handed while working. The only chore I could find was picking at the hangnails on my hands. It wasn't long before I'd finished that, and sat, lost without anything to do except stare at Lillian's face, stifling my inclination to yawn.

"I go very fast," Lillian began, indicating in some small way what I was in for, "but you can interrupt me, and I'm going to say that I had a tie to the other side of life, and I feel that it was around 1968 that, this lady is telling me, there was a traumatic incident, or a traumatic upset in your life that I feel that you are still tied to in some way."

I mentally checked my own biography, trying to figure out what had happened in 1968 that might qualify as traumatic. At first I came up empty-handed; nothing seemed to fit. But then, as I sat there, I realized that it was in 1968 that Lona had first talked about wanting to see other men and brought up separating. The actual separation was still a year away then, but the murder had been set. Lona had set her sights on our relationship, and it would fall beneath her final shot.

What, I wondered, was Lillian about to get into? I didn't have long to wait. Before I could digest the impact of the remark about 1968, she had already gone on to discuss several other spirits, individuals who might easily have been my maternal grandmother's sisters but who, I interjected, might just as easily have not been them. I didn't know enough about my great-aunts to decide one way or another how accurate Lillian's descriptions were. But before I could interrupt to ask her to describe the mystery-guest ghosts a bit better, she was off on yet another matter.

"I'm getting a very, very severe pain across my back," she said, hunching her shoulders forward, as though she were really in pain. "Something happened through her shoulders that would have caused either a broken neck, broken back - something across here."

Lillian was right on both counts. Lona, I recalled from my quick perusal of the autopsy report, had suffered both a broken neck and a fractured spinal column. Perhaps this woman with the fortune-teller's face had, in fact, some talent after all.

"As I'm looking at you," she rattled on, barely taking a breath between the long phrases, "I can see a blackout right in front of me, and I'm going to say that I do not want to see ropes, but I see something tying around her chest." She made a sudden gasp, as though someone had sneaked up behind her and

given her an unexpected hug. It told me more than she knew. Nelda Speers had referred to ropes, and now Lillian was returning to the theme. I thought of the ropes of Lona's and Kelleher's parachutes, ropes that had tangled around their bodies and made it impossible for Lona to pull her ripcord. That was what had happened, I thought. Nothing else made sense. If Lona had had her hands free, her ripcord would have been pulled - I had no doubts about that. But she hadn't pulled it.

But Lillian was saying that something other than ropes had wrapped around Lona's torso, forcing her to plunge to the ground without a hope. I scored Lillian one point for the ropes, but penalized her for not knowing that they had kept Lona locked in a prison of nylon and plastic.

"I can't breathe, okay." Lillian sounded strangled, as though hands were squeezing at her throat, but before I could become alarmed, the sensation apparently passed, and Lillian was once more talking without interference. "But I feel that you're tied to her some way, whether it would be ..." She paused for a moment, as though searching for the correct word. "Whether it would have been in a marriage situation, and you're widowed, I really don't know - I don't really care."

Lillian may not have cared, but I certainly did. Here I was, a complete stranger to this woman - she knew my name, what I looked and sounded like, and the fact that I was writing a book - and she guessed that I had had a wife who was now dead. Given that I wore no wedding band, was only in my thirties, and had said nothing about my personal life, that was a rather amazing bit of luck, not unlike sulking a hole in one with one's eyes shut. Lillian hadn't even known what I was hoping she would hit upon in the reading. My face might have betrayed my amazement, but I was consciously holding my emotions in rein. I knew that some individuals were very clever at reading a person's face. Arched eyebrows, a sudden squint, lips lifting slightly at the corners - all were clues that could be used to set sail in the most likely direction. And I intended to give Lillian no help in spinning tales that might seem to resemble the truth only because they echoed the hints that I myself was giving. My face was set in a pleasantly bored expression, as though I were standing on a street corner waiting for a bus to arrive. No emotion showed in the features, no light in the eyes - just facade, the exterior of what might well be an empty container.

"But I'm going to say that you have a marriage situation or an emotional involvement now, but my tie is still with this lady." I thought about Julie, and how I gravitated emotionally toward memories, toward the sun-kissed images of Lona and young love, whenever the situation with Julie deteriorated. I was not torn between two women; I did not choose Lona over Julie. It was just that Lona represented a lot of lovely things gone wrong, while Julie seemed to be a case of beautiful potentials that were going nowhere. I had no doubt that the two of us could have a marvelous marriage, but whether or not we ever would have it remained in doubt. I wondered whether Lillian had any idea how accurate her random comments were. But Lillian was not analyzing her effect on me; she was unloading words as rapidly and as mindlessly as a dump truck unloading a ton of gravel. It spilled out over me, jamming my mind's sorting mechanism with nuggets of nonsense.

"She hands me a baby," Lillian was remarking, embarking on another side track. "So I'm going to say, somewhere in the course of your life, there was a child that either passed very very early in life or died in early pregnancy, but it was a fetus - it was a pregnancy."

I could not avoid thinking of my brother, though I did not want to. Each of the mediums that I'd



consulted had mentioned the spirit of a baby, and Irene had specified that it was a boy. I was already finding difficulty in maintaining my skepticism, so I was glad when Lillian did not linger on the subject. She seemed to be back on the topic of Lona.

"I'm getting this lady, this younger woman here," she was saying. "I'm going to say, for some reason, I'm going to say I get a green stone. She's handing me a green stone. So I don't know whether you were born in May, whether she was born in May ..."

I didn't wait for Lillian to finish the sentence. My mind jumped ahead, leapfrogging over the inconsequential. Lona had been born in November, on November 10, 1946, but she had died in May. Lillian was oblivious to my growing confusion.

"But this lady is telling me here, and I'm going to say to you that in the moment of death, that I feel that someone tried to talk to her, even after she was dead."

I wondered if someone at the scene of the accident had said something to Lona, had yelled out, "Are you all right?" as she lay on the ground, or if Elek had called out her name, wept her name, as he waited at the jump center for word. I had no way of knowing.

"And I'm going to say that with either you or with someone around you, that there was a special name used. Your name is Craig - she did not use the word Craig to you. There was a special name used. It isn't 'Hon,' it isn't 'Love.' It's some special name that was used in a sensuous, or in a moment of, uhmmm" - she smacked her hand down on the table, as though crushing a fly or physically punctuating the sentence - "love-making, closeness," she continued, as though she'd just demolished a mental roadblock. "There was a special name that was used."

Lillian seemed to be piling one mystery upon another. I knew nothing about what people at the jump center might have said immediately after the accident and could not for the life of me think of a pet name that Lona had used. We had not gone in much for that sort of thing. I was not sweetie pie, and she was no honey bear; we called one another "sweetheart" or "hon," but that was it. As Lillian took a quick drag on her cigarette, I tried to recall some name that might fit the description; I couldn't.

"I want to say that this lady who had problems in breathing also spoke another language." Finally we were back with something that seemed to fit. Lona had spoken Spanish fluently. "There's an American flag that floats right in front of her too, so I'm going to say that there was somebody in a service situation that she was close to." We were back in muddle again, slogging through information that made no sense to me. I began to have my doubts about Lillian once more; perhaps her first few hits had been nothing other than beginner's luck.

Lillian spoke of a legal problem that I was having. I immediately thought of the libel suit that the alleged rapist had filed against me. She said that the trouble had begun in February, that there would be a notarized paper for me to sign in August, and that the entire matter would be resolved in November. The suit, I noted with some amazement, had in fact been filed in February, but there was no way to know how or when it would be resolved.

"Uh, back to this young lady here. I'm going to say that she says to me that there is a green ... I get a green settee, green couch, green spread - something very green in a house, and I want to go back a few years, okay. I have something very green, and she's showing it to me. I want to say sofa, I can't tell you if I'm in a bedroom or I'm in a parlor, but I get green ... but I see her sitting there."

Suddenly a slide seemed to flash onto the screen on my mind. I saw Lona sitting in her pyjamas on the couch in our living room in Maple Shade. It was Christmas morning, the last Christmas that Lona and I spent together, and Lona was watching as Joanne, who was only three, unwrapped her presents. I spent an hour and several rolls of film documenting this last brief flash of family joy. The photographs were sitting in a cardboard box somewhere. I hadn't seen them for several years, but now I could see this one.

And I could see the sofa plainly; it was green, with floral print cushions. I'd completely forgotten about it. Lona had taken it when we were divorced and either gotten rid of it or covered it. I couldn't recall the last time I'd seen it.

"And again I see a document," Lillian rolled on, as though she were describing a passing scene that refused to stop, "uhm, in a picture, okay. I want a picture, but in the back of the picture, I want a piece of paper" - -wham - her hand slammed down on the tabletop again - "okay, that either has been filed with it or was put under it. Can't tell you if it's a marriage license, can't tell you; they don't show me the paper. But there's a picture of this girl, woman, but under" - crack - the hand struck again - "in the back of this picture, there's a piece of paper. Can't tell you if it's a bill, or if it's something of hers. She's sitting on a green couch and she's showing me this picture."

It took some rearranging of my mental furniture, but I put a picture in Lona's hands in the photograph of that Christmas morn.

"There's a smile crack in the lips, but it's not a smile, what you would call a smile. Very, very pleasant looking, but it's not per se a big silly grin."

I was becoming a bit impatient with Lillian's wandering and often nebulous descriptions; I preferred facts to impressions. A simple summary of age, height, weight, color of eyes and hair, was more evidential than talk of pet names and smile lines.

"How old does this person look?" I interrupted, playing Joe Friday to Lillian's spaced-out witness.

"This person to me, I'm getting - she's showing me eyes more than she's showing me mouth," Lillian went on, as though I'd never spoken. "I do not feel that she smiled very toothy. I'm going to say that the smiles were very, very gentle. You could almost not see her smile, but knowing the smile just by the expression of the face."

This was a vague, rather poetic impression of a person's appearance, but I found myself unwillingly moved by it; it stirred a memory that I could not even put into words, the memory of a smile, Lona's smile. Lillian's description was accurate, but I could attest to its accuracy only with my feelings. How, after all, could I graph or define a smile? But as Lillian sat there, her mouth running away like an out-

of-control locomotive, I found that I was gravitating toward Lona, moving toward the softness and the lovely moments that we'd shared, in much the same way that I did when Julie and I had our firefights.

"I want the eyes to be - I want to say very cold at times when she was upset but very soft ninety-nine percent of the time. I see the hair changed twice, all right?"

I'm going to say the hair I have at a very long length, bobbed, flipped up and I see it very long and turned under and I see it pulled back, so I can't tell you if she's got it cut. But she shows me three different hair styles."

As she spoke, new images flashed on and off in my mind. I saw Lona as she was when I met her: eighteen years old, her dark hair coming to the middle of her neck and teased up. Later her hair grew longer, and she brushed it under, curling it toward that special spot where the fine hairs blossomed like nerve endings at the top of the graceful white column. Finally, after she married Elek, she let her hair go native, growing it quite long and holding it back simply with two bobby pins most of the time. Lillian's description was quite accurate, even though it wasn't the sort of name, address, and identification number that I'd hoped for.

"This lady does show me something with her fingernail," Lillian breezed along without stopping for breath. "So I'm going to say either that she had it very long or, when she would talk, she would tap." The index finger of Lillian's hand began to tap against the Formica of the table. clicking down like a miniature pile driver. "Okay, this was something - not mad, but a tap. And I'm going to have to use the word 'wife' with you."

Her pronouncement caught me by surprise. I was caught up in the tapping finger and completely dumbfounded by it: I did not recognize it; it made no sense to me. "Wife," she had said, just a little detail that had fallen from her tongue like a crumb from a table. It was as though I'd suddenly caught sight of Lona's face in a crowd. It was one thing to say "a marriage situation" - that was an institution, a covenant between two people. "Wife" was something else; "wife" was Lona or Julie it was a person, someone whom I had loved and held in my arms. "Wife" was a word that made you cry for joy or in anger, but it was more real, more pinpoint-accurate, than anything else Lillian had said.

I waited for her to continue, for her to tell me everything that I wanted to know. Instead she tripped along down another unexpected and unseen little path.

"And I'm just going to say, walking in, I'm going to say that I see a gentleman come in. And I'm going to say he's not in a business suit at all. He didn't do that kind of work. I'm going to say he wears a lumber-jacket-type thing, a heavy mackinaw-type thing. He is missing a finger, or he is missing the top of a finger. There is something wrong with his finger, okay."

I had no doubts who this person was. Each of the mediums had spoken of him, and now yet another, a fourth, was joining in the consensus. My maternal grandfather had always worn the type of jacket that Lillian had described, but that was hardly evidential. It was less easy to explain the coincidence of the finger. Half an inch of his right index finger was missing. It was such a small scar that I'd rarely noticed it. But every once in a while, when we were visiting, I would discover it anew, notice it, and

wonder how it had happened. I had not thought about it since the last time I'd seen him.

If there was any possibility of mistaken identity, the rest of Lillian's description soon precluded it; she said that this gentleman was generally quiet, but had an explosive temper, smoked a pipe and cigars, had a tiny blister on his lip, suffered with a prostate problem, and had walked "very" slowly for the last year and a half of his life. It was all correct, though even I didn't remember the blister and knew nothing about the prostate condition. Later I checked with my mother, who recalled them vividly.

It was a feat which would have done the Amazing Kreskin proud.

"I'm going to use the word religious," Lillian moved on reluctant to give me a chance to let it all sink in, "because I'm going to say I get two books. I get a yarmulke, so I'm going to use the small Jewish prayer book, okay. It looks like Masonic ritual is what it looks' like to me. I have another woman here, and she has rosary beads, so I have to say that somewhere in your background we took in three basic religions."

She was right again. I had been raised in the Protestant faith, Lona had been Roman Catholic, and Julie, whose father happened to be a Mason, was Jewish.

Lillian continued to wander all over creation, touching on matters in my personal Hie, discussing problems I would encounter, describing spirits who were stopping by. She spoke about my plans for a book and other writing projects. It was as though several computer programs had been combined accidentally, and the printout was now producing an all-in-one text on astronomy, medicine, and Medieval English Literature. At times, it was difficult to keep the characters or the tense of what was happening straight. I had to stop Lillian to have her identify a figure or tell me whether she was talking about the living or the dead. But more often than not, grains of truth spiced the rough, run-along monologue.

Periodically she returned to topics she'd already touched upon, but I was anxious to lure her back to Lona. I handed her Lona's watch and asked if she could tell me something about its owner. She took it and without missing a beat told me, "Okay, I'm going to say I've already, that I feel I've already brought this person in," and without missing another beat returned to the American flag.

"I feel at one particular time that he was in the service. I don't know if he deserted, I don't know if he took chemicals. I feel that he was a lost person and I'm going to say chemicals in some way. Whether he took tranquilizers, drugs, or drank I really can't tell you, but he's on the other side of life. And they're showing me this American flag."

I had no hint of what Lillian was talking about. The description fitted no one whom Lona and I had known but she'd made a lot of new friends after we'd separated - jumpers, other students at Rutgers, and many were into drugs. There was no way for me to know whether or not such a person had existed.

"Uhm, and again I don't feel he died an easy death, okay. I feel that some member of your family or somebody very, very close to you was there. And I'm going to say I get his head, and it's a very, very

swollen type thing. This gentleman, his head is very swollen, feel a lot of ..." She reached for her head and touched the temples gently, as though testing the surface of a tender bump. "Just swollen ... I don't like the way that he died. He died" - she snapped her fingers loudly, extinguishing a life with the crack - "but he was in a coma, and I feel somebody was trying to talk to him, and he's saying, 'Well, I heard them, I heard them, I heard them....'"

I found myself being drawn into the puzzle that Lillian was shaping, wondering who this person was and indeed, if this person was, but as soon as my attention was fully engaged, Lillian switched gears again. She told me that a young couple whom I knew were going to get a divorce, but that after a period of time they would remarry each other; it was a cheery little anecdote, certainly light relief from medical reports of veterans with broken heads, but I couldn't place the couple. Too many of my friends were on the brink of divorce.

Finally Lillian returned to the watch, which was moving restlessly, never resting, in her hands. "As I'm picking and feeling this particular watch here," began, but abruptly sighed deeply, as though she'd lost some little piece of her soul. "Again I get a lot of pains across my chest, okay, with this particular thing, and a lot of tightness, but I get a lot of something in my arm, like my arm was either crushed or my arm was either pulled, destroyed. I feel like I'm tied into something; I feel like my chest, my back ... I feel, I still feel, I - would this belong to the lady that's on the other side, okay?" Before I could answer, she had confirmed the diagnosis for herself. "This is the same. I can pick it up from, because I'm losing my breath with it."

"Bingo!" I thought to myself, and mentally congratulated Lillian for the hit. She'd discussed at least half a dozen different spirits, one of whom bore a remarkable resemblance to my first wife, and now she had linked this rather nondescript watch, which might have been worn by either a man or a woman, to that same person. The odds against it were at least five to one. Slowly Lillian was chipping away at my skepticism like a master sculptor fashioning a contemporary Pieta; she may have looked like a suburban gypsy, but her abilities certainly surpassed those of most scientists I'd met.

"I feel like I've got it here," she said, tracing a line across the top of her chest, "and I got it across my back and my arm. It was like lifeless. And I do feel that you did try to talk to her afterwards."

This was the second time Lillian had mentioned this, and it piqued my inquisitiveness. I tried to think back to the evening of the day Lona had died. What had I been doing then? What had I been thinking at the time? And slowly it came back to me. I remembered sitting at my desk, working on the story about the LSD odyssey. I remembered thinking of Lona, finding her resurrected in my feelings by the Mexican associations. And faintly I recalled that I had found myself talking to her that night, carrying on a little interior monologue with her; but at the time, I'd had no idea that she was dead.

I had tried to talk to Lona immediately after the accident! How could anyone else know?

Lillian spoke of a necklace that Lona had worn. "I'm getting a chain, okay. And then I have either a teardrop or a pearl or something, but in one of the pictures there is a chain, and it lays right at her breast here." This was another unfamiliar detail.

"And I see it here, uhm." Lillian groaned as she touched the spot at the base of her throat. "I get an awful lot through the shoulders, uhm, in my legs - I just feel all crunched. Can you understand what I'm saying? I feel like I'm all crunched and broke, but I feel like I don't hurt. Can you understand what I'm trying to say?"

I only wished that I didn't understand. Lillian's description of Lona's agony bothered me a great deal; I consciously turned my mind off, listening to the words but refusing to turn them into mental pictures. I had no desire to see Lona that way; I preferred to remember her as I had known her in life, not as she was in death.

Lillian turned to less disturbing subjects. She spoke of an orchid and a rose that Lona had once received, made another passing reference to a pet name, and then launched into an even more detailed description of my grandfather. She sketched his appearance accurately, noted that he'd once worn a mustache, that he spoke two languages, cultivated a garden, used glasses, carried blue or red handkerchiefs, and had an old-fashioned pocket watch with a gold cover that snapped open beneath his thumb.

The only thing that she didn't provide was his Social Security number.

Perhaps if I'd asked...

Mine was a mind-boggling experience, or rather a mind-denying experience; it suggested that Lillian was obtaining information - correct and complete information-about people who were dead. I could not imagine matching Lillian's portrait of my grandfather with very many other people; the images could not have overlapped in so many particulars. But as amazing as it was, my principal interest was Lona. I drifted toward her as a foundering ship drifts toward the safety of shore.

I asked if Lillian could tell me her name.

"No, I don't get a name," she said. "But I am going to say that I get the name Ralph, and I don't normally get names. And I'm getting the word 'Jean.' Can't tell you if it's a man or a woman. And I'm getting a Jerean, and I'm going to have to - and I get a Jeanette. I do not get names, but they just fell right in front of me for you."

I was having a hard time keeping all this straight - I suspected that I'd have to hire a CPA to bring a bit of order to it - and the names just lay in front of me for several minutes before anything clicked. Then I suddenly flashed on Lona's aunt and uncle. They lived outside Oklahoma City, and we'd spent a week with them when we first moved there. I hadn't seen them or talked to them in more than twelve years.

Their names were Ralph and Virgie. I didn't even know what Virgie stood for; Ralph and Virgie was all that we'd ever called them.

This was getting more and more interesting, but unfortunately - or, considering the strain it was creating, fortunately - Lillian was beginning to run out of steam; Old Faithful was sinking down. She mentioned a sleeveless, orchid-colored gown that Lona had worn. I did not recall ever having seen it.

And she began to describe her again.

"Cable sweater, okay. I don't want a blouse underneath it. Do you know what I'm talking about ski pants when they get close to the leg, okay - this kind of thing, close to the leg. Shoes were not per se an ordinary type of shoe, but I can't tell you what because I've never seen them before. But the sweater is ... I'm going to say it was tan, uhm, not brown, but tan. I'm going to say to you that she wore two rings, okay. And she had a habit of tugging her sleeves down if they rode up, she didn't like them riding up her arm."

Desperate to capture and pin down facts, I asked Lillian what color this person's hair and eyes had been. "I get a brownish - I don't want black, I don't want blond either," she told me. "I want her right in the middle. I can't get her eyes. I got them as two different colors. I got a hazel similar to my eyes, okay, and then I get them kind of changing."

Lona's hair was brunette; her eyes were hazel, but at times they flared into a scintillating green.

The reading had taken its toll of both Lillian and me. She had suffered several broken ribs in her automobile accident and for the past hour had been subjected to someone else's pain. I'd been confronted by a wealth of impossible research about several individuals who were dead. Lillian's dossiers were impressive. I considered how long and how difficult it would have been for me, a journeyman journalist, to gather this sort of information about a stranger. It would have taken several weeks, and I would have had to have had some starting point: an address, a telephone number, something. Lillian had had none of those advantages.

It was like asking a blind man. to paint a portrait of someone he'd never met. I considered it one of the most remarkable experiences I'd ever had.

As I walked away from Lillian's home, all the details of the afternoon jostled against one another in my mind like pieces of flotsam coagulated by slack tide; it was hard to concentrate on any one piece or to find any pattern or purpose in the mass. I thought of Lillian's description of Lona a description that had not only caught her appearance, but a bit of her spirit as well. And her intimate knowledge of my grandfather had made for a premier performance. But one comment stuck in my hide, as tenacious as the banderillas in the back of a bull. I could not shake it.

"I'm going to say she's close to you," Lillian had remarked "but you'd better free yourself, because you're never going to be happy if you don't - you're always going to be lame. You're going to be playing between two world, and it's not the best thing you can do."

## Chapter Seven

Julie was fascinated by the reading with Lillian Ventura, but refused to take it seriously. She didn't believe in ghosts or other creatures that went bump in the night and wasn't about to be persuaded by the stories that I'd brought back with me from the afternoon outing. She felt that Lillian had been especially perceptive and that she might have some ESP ability, but that her performance amounted to no more than that at the most.

This was an interesting reservation and one with a certain amount of authority. A number of studies have been conducted with mediums over the years, and in many cases they have been particularly adept at tuning into the flow of another's subconscious, perceiving thoughts and memories that linger there, then telling that person what he already knows. In one case, a group of British journalists fabricated a fictitious individual who had allegedly died and went to a number of mediums seeking to establish contact with their departed friend. Many of the mediums were remarkably successful in describing this person who had never existed. That individuals should be able to read another's mind so chillingly well seems nearly as unlikely and as amazing as the notion of contacting the dead in person, but it apparently had happened in some cases.

I made a mental note to put a further burden of proof on Lillian and any other mediums I might contact. It was certainly extraordinary that they were able to discuss in such detail members of my family who had died, but even that could not be considered completely evidential; one could not rule out the ESP hypothesis. But if they were capable of informing me about things I knew nothing about, that would be another story. An even more complex and increasingly implausible theory would be required to explain it away. I started to feel that perhaps I had been the victim of some very impressive guessing and a desire to contact Lona; possibly I was giving more credit to Lillian than Lillian was really due. It was a sobering and reassuring possibility. Perhaps I still had control of my senses.

But I still was having problems with my dreams. People kept creeping into them and performing there, when they had no right to be on that particular stage. The night after I'd seen Lillian, I dreamed of Lona again. Once more, it was a lucid dream, a dream in which I was aware of the fact that I wasn't awake and was able to control the content of the dream to a limited extent. I was in a store and faintly saw a crowd of ghostlike figures drifting by, shoppers painted in a see-through white, like people fashioned from fog. They passed by me, oblivious to my presence, and I paid little attention to them. But then, at the opposite end of the room, I saw my first wife.

Lona was coming toward me, her face and upper body clearly visible. She was no ghost, but a full-fleshed person, color and dimension distinguishing her from her fellow-shoppers. I saw her eyes and her mouth as clearly as though she were alive. In fact, I saw them more clearly. The figure had an intensity, a brightness of color and perfection of detail, that one does not see in real life but only in paintings or in the supersaturated colors of Kodachrome II.

Lona was wearing a dress with a frilly yoke, and I thought that I had seen it before. I didn't seem surprised by her presence, but instead responded to the situation automatically, emotionally, doing what was in my heart rather than what was in my head. I took her in my arms and held her tightly.



"I don't care what you say. I don't care what you think, or how you feel," I told her. "I'm never going to let go of you again."

I was completely prepared to take that option, to hold Lona in my arms forever if that was the only way in which I could keep her.

Lona was unmoved by my statement; she seemed oblivious to my presence, in fact. At first, when she was approaching, no hint of recognition had showed in her eyes, and now, now that I held her to my heart like a prized photograph of someone I loved, it was as though she didn't realize that I was there. Before I could decipher why she was ignoring me, she had mysteriously slipped out of my arms and was now standing behind me. Before I could make a move to grab and stop her, to keep her from running away once more, she was gone, and a black curtain seemed to drop between the two of us. It was as though the curtain had fallen at the end of a brief and rather uneventful play. I realized that she was leaving, but surprisingly was not disturbed by this. It seemed a natural occurrence at the time. Within the senseless context of sleep, it seemed the right thing to have happen. I turned to watch her leave, but she was already out of sight. But then, before the dream ended, I heard her voice near my left ear; it was as though she stood inches away and was whispering to me. "Because you have loved me so, I love you ... equally," she said.

I was pleased by the compliment. Lona had had very few for me in recent memory, and I was happy to have her saying such things again. I was also impressed by the voice itself. It was as clear as the peal of a midnight bell in a sleeping city. Her voice had been a sweet, feminine one, not hard and brusque; it soothed me with its softness, but sometimes seemed affected. I had not heard it for two years, and now I had heard it again - not some nameless, faceless sound stirring in my subconscious, but the voice of the real person that I'd known.

It took a while for me to recover from the events of the past few days. I immersed myself in my other work, taking pleasure in the matter-of-fact nature of it. I was relieved not to have to labor to understand what was happening in my life; facts were such a happy companion, something on which I could always rely. It was a matter of principle with me to want to entertain any semblance of the truth that wandered into my life, but I found it hard to put out the welcome mat for lies or dissembling or half-baked ideas. My nature shied away from taking other people's convictions or beliefs for my own unless they fitted into the scheme of my intellectual lifestyle.

Fortunately I rarely had to delve into matters where such standards became impossible to employ. I wasn't in the habit of getting involved in stories that could not be understood; it had rarely even occurred to me that there were such stories. Everything in the universe, it seemed, was explicable; one had only to wait for the right scientist with the appropriate theory to come along. The answers were there. It was merely a matter of finding them.

I wasn't inclined to resume my search for Lona's soul, but as usual it really didn't seem to matter. It was as though she was looking for me. Three nights later, she returned to me again in another dream, although this time I received a message rather than a visit from her. The dream was long and involved and consisted of segments, each of which was intriguing, but none of which had the impact of the one concerning Lona.

In this particular segment, I found myself in a small, dark, cell-like room; it reminded me of a dungeon, but I had no fears about my being interred or injured. It was just a place to meet, a context for what was to follow. I lay down in this stark, sunless hole and drifted off to sleep, and no sooner had I fallen asleep in my dream than I began to dream again - a dream within a dream. It has occurred to me since then that this was not unlike a lucid dream; I made no overt decision that this must be a dream, but to dream a dream within all dream clearly indicated that something out of the ordinary was going on. Within this second dream, I received a plain white envelope which, when I opened it, proved to contain a piece of plain white paper. The paper was legal-size, but blank. I wondered whether there might be some message secreted in its emptiness and held it up to a light to see whether there was a watermarked message for me. I stared through its surface, but saw nothing.

But as I held it there, drops of water suddenly materialized on the paper and ran down its length, marking it as though they were tears being used for ink. As the beads of liquid moved down the length of the special delivery letter, words began to appear. "Dear Craigie," the note began. I was amazed by the salutation. I hadn't been called Craigie in a very long while. It was a nickname which my sisters had pinned on me when we were young but which had been restricted to the family; the only other person who had used it regularly was Lona. That was her pet name for me.

I suddenly recalled Lillian's remark about a name which Lona had used in a loving way. It hadn't rung a bell at the time, but now it did. I knew that this note was from Lona. I angled the paper against the light, trying to make out the rest of the words. "Dear Craigie: I'm very glad that I was able to spend seven years of life, of love, of loveliness with you." I could make out the style of handwriting - it was Lona's - but I wasn't certain about the seven years. It was rather difficult to determine how much time Lona and I had actually spent with one another. Did one stop the clock when we first separated? when Lona and Elek married? when Lona had died? I'd have to think about this question later; it was certainly too demanding for me to work out in a dream.

I was very touched by the note, but anxious to confirm its origins. I skipped over the rest of the message, jumping to the signature. I saw the name as clearly as if it had been chiseled in stone. "Lona Lee," the signature read. I was certain that it was hers.

When I went back to read the rest of the letter, though, the dream within a dream ended, and I found myself swept off into another night-time fantasy.

I didn't know what to make of such dreams. It was one thing to have Lillian tell me that Lona used to call me by a particular name when we were confiding to each other in bed; it was something else to receive special delivery letters in the middle of the night that sparked my burned-out memory of the same.

The one thing I realized, though, was that regardless of what the dreams represented, and for that matter regardless of what the mediums represented, I couldn't allow myself to be absorbed by it, to lose my integrity within the nonsense of all of this. I had to hold onto reality even if I sacrificed Lona. It was the only way I could maintain any perspective on things, to keep my feet on the ground.

It was all right to let these things happen, to observe them and try to analyze them, but it was

something else to let myself be subverted by the observed. I consciously strove to sift the phenomena from my mind after each of the episodes, to clear the slate so that the normal calculations could go on as usual. I couldn't conceive of letting them happen at all if they lingered on, obscuring the details of the real world. I had to forget them, to put them behind me as though they had never happened. It was fascinating material, but material that couldn't be carried around. It was like a rich meal that had to be eaten and digested in small portions; too much at one sitting, and all the systems began to go berserk. I intended to come out of this experience still with my usual skepticism, which wasn't about to be left behind because of some supernatural pyrotechnics. I felt that the best way to do this was to treat the material much as I might treat a particularly engrossing television show. I watched, listened, mentally criticized what I saw, but once the show was over, I swept it from my mind like the leavings of a banquet swept through an open door. I forgot that it had happened, remembering the scenario only when something brought it back to mind. In this case, I couldn't allow even that the material was too disconcerting, too prone to interfere with my normal style. I purposely avoided anything that might rekindle the incident - my notes or tape recordings, for example.

But something haunted me about the incident with Lillian, something I couldn't explain. I'd sensed that Lillian had known more than she was telling, that for some reason of her own she'd held back information. I wanted to know if this was so, to find out if there was anything else she could tell me. I realized, too, that I knew little about Lillian herself; she might be a friend of deceased members of my family, but I didn't know the first thing about her. All I had to go on were my first impressions; I hadn't learned anything more about her during our meeting. She'd done all the talking, and all of it had been about me or spirits who were drawn to my presence. The only thing that I'd realized as we went along was that Lillian wasn't any gypsy fortuneteller; she was too complicated for that sort of pigeonholing. I had no idea what the woman was really like, but a vague notion of what she was able to do.

I decided that I'd call on Lillian once more and made arrangements to see her on the second Friday in June. This time, though, I wasn't about to walk into her kitchen unprepared. I spent an evening getting ready for my second encounter with the lady with the strange ability to communicate with unseen spirit entities. I drew up a list of questions I intended to put to her, questions that would pin down the extent of her spirit contact. I only wanted to find out whether her powers were normal, that\* is, ESP, or whether they seemed to represent something more. I felt that she would have a hard time when the spirits were confronted with requests for specific information instead of unquestioning, open-mouthed wonder. My list of questions was several pages long and covered as many aspects of Lona's life as I could think of: the date of her birth, her Social Security number, what style of clothing she'd worn when we first were dating. These were facts about which there could be no disagreement - one Social Security number cannot be mistaken for another. The list also included several questions I did not know the answers to. That enabled me to test the ESP hypothesis.

After Lillian had given her answers, I'd be able to find out what the truth was, then compare it to what she'd said. If the two matched, the rational explanations were in serious trouble.

I also collected twenty photographs of different women. Some were local celebrities, others complete unknowns, and three were girls that I'd met in college. One of the three was Lona, a seventeen-year-old senior in high school when the photograph was taken; this was possibly my favorite photo of her. She stood in half-profile, looking up and toward the right like a child gazing at the stars in the sky. Her hair was very short - shorter than I'd ever seen it - and her neck was long and white. I had always felt

that this was the Lona I'd loved, an ideal that was far removed from the physical reality of the woman. It seemed to be the person who hid inside: a soft, frightened child who was still searching for someone else to make her world right.

The photographs were all black-and-white prints, but in a number of sizes and finishes. There were no identifying marks on any of them. If Lillian was able to pick Lona's picture out of the batch in less than six tries, I'd be disposed to believe in her explanations much more than I did now.

I was armed for bear when I set out for Holbrook, a small working-class community just south of Boston. Lillian's house was a two-story, white frame house on a busy road that played host to restaurants, bowling alleys, and funeral parlors as well as homes. It was the sort of neighborhood where the kids spent their afternoons ripping automobiles apart in cluttered backyards and where the principal pastime at night was Let's Make a Deal. Lillian's home was flakier than most, with its assortment of unexplained characters and its host of middle-class aspirations.

The yard at the side of the house was littered with the shells of automobiles that her husband, Bill, was always working on, and bits and pieces of his other projects completed the junkyard motif. He was constantly wandering from the house to outside duties, but then returning a short while later to chat or offer a visitor a soda. I liked him, but couldn't imagine how he made a living. I knew that he was a contractor and apparently handled small jobs, but it seemed that his span of attention wasn't long enough to take care of changing a tire, let alone building a house.

He and Lillian seemed alike in that respect. I knew that she kept extremely busy. She conducted classes for aspiring mediums several nights a week and conducted private readings for dozens of people each week. She was a mother, had raised several foster children, and was active in a Spiritualist church. But it seemed impossible that she did anything other than by accident. Her house was neat where it mattered - in public - but tended the more to messiness the further one explored.

It was as though her involvement in the spirit world interfered with her activity here. Lillian was like someone walking around with a transistor radio to her ear; the radio added something to her experience but took a lot of her concentration from the more mundane matters at hand. How, after all, could one remain concerned with "ring around the collar" when the ghost of George Washington was waiting with a message?

Lillian was busy with a reading when I arrived. Her husband had built a small separate room in their backyard, which was where Lillian conducted readings, taught her classes, and escaped from the noise of the house. I sat at the kitchen table, reading the inspirational plaques while waiting for Lillian to arrive. They were not the same as watching educational TV. After a short while, Lillian came in, fixed herself a cup of coffee, and after taking a few phone calls, sat down opposite me. She eyed my folders of photographs questioningly, as though they were an insect she'd never seen before. I turned on my tape recorder, explained what I hoped she'd be able to do, and slid the folder over to her.

I turned away from her, looking down at my notepad, so that I couldn't see which photograph she was examining at any given moment. I had no doubts that if I could see, some small clue would give me away when she came to Lona's - a widening of the eyes, a deepening of the furrows in my forehead.

Looking at my notepad, I couldn't inadvertently tell Lillian, either physically or subconsciously, which photograph was of Lona.

Lillian treated the experiment like a novel toy, something she'd never played with before but was anxious to give a try; she frankly admitted that she wasn't sure how she'd make out. But I was certain she'd fail; we'd now increased the odds against her to 20 to 1.

Lillian wasn't intimidated by the challenge. She shuffled through the photographs as quickly and complacently as a Las Vegas dealer manipulating a of cards. I could hear the photos slapping against on another as she flipped through the stack. Before I had a chance to make a single entry in my notebook Lillian began to speak.

"I've never done this with photographs before," said, and I thought, Ahhaa! Lillian was striking out but before I could enjoy the defeat, she went on, immediately I got the palpitation. Do you know all three of them?" she asked.

I glanced up from the tabletop and saw that Lillian was holding three of the twenty photographs. One was of a stranger; one was of Ann Louise Pofahl, a girl whom I'd dated in college. And the third photograph was of Lona.

Lillian had taken all of fifteen seconds to pull thee out of the pile.

"Do you know all three of them?" she asked.

I indicated that the one photograph was not of some one I knew, and she set it aside, but held up the one of Ann Louise.

"Okay, I'm going to say to you that this one here the minute I picked it up, I started to get a palpitation of my heart, okay. Would this have been the lady that I've seen?"

I told her that it wasn't.

"Okay," she continued, taking little notice, as though her impressions were more important than the score. "I want to know why, looking at this particular picture here, I'm asking if you know her." "I did know her," I replied.

"Okay, would there have been at any time an emotional tie with her?"

It had been a one-sided relationship, with me doing the chasing and she the eluding, but yes, there was an emotional tie.

"Okay, that answers my question," she said, and held up Lona's photograph. "Do you know this lady here?" she asked.

I tried to steel myself, to restrain any emotions that might flash across my face. "Yes," I told her

simply. "Would this have been she?" Lillian asked. "Yes," I said.

"Okay, I'll tell you why," she explained. "I want you to look in their faces and see the close resemblance in the softness of the face."

She was right. Lona and Ann Louise looked much like sisters in the photographs. Both were dark-haired, with soft smiles and gentle eyes; it would have been easy to mistake the one for the other. But I hated to give any ground. Lillian had managed to select two photographs of women whom I'd been involved with out of a stack of twenty, but she hadn't been able to identify Lona immediately. It had taken her all of two guesses. That was quite an accomplishment, but it wasn't perfect.

She seemed reluctant to discuss Lona, caught by something in the picture of Ann Louise. It was as though something had captured her attention and she was unable to shake it. I hadn't seen Ann Louise for more than thirteen years and had little idea what had happened to her. She had been a beautiful young woman, more attractive than Lona, and I imagined that she'd married, had a few children, and was now living in a suburb of El Paso. But that wasn't the impression that Lillian had.

"I feel very drawn to her," Lillian explained. "I feel that this lady has had some problems recently. I don't know how you're going to hear about it or where you're going to hear of her from, but I'm picking up similar to a wheezing in my breast - whether she's had a mastectomy or whether she's had problems with her lungs or in the bust area, but there's definitely something in her lung-bust area that I feel, health-wise, that is cutting off my breathing. I don't feel as though she's dying, okay, but I feel that she definitely has something wrong."

It was unpleasant to hear this assessment, even though I had no way of knowing whether or not it was accurate. If there was one thing that was prominent about Ann Louise, it was her figure, and the notion of a mastectomy seemed like a desecration. I couldn't imagine her without her beautiful breasts. She may have had the operation, but I couldn't stand to think about it.

"She would have a gaunt, drawn expression if you were to run into her again, and I feel you will."

I thought that was about as likely as being nominated for the Presidency. I hadn't heard a word about Ann Louise since I'd left the Southwest and thought it unlikely that that would change. I wasn't in the habit of receiving unexpected updates on old girlfriends.

Throughout the reading, Lillian kept returning to the subject, though. She seemed to be very concerned about Ann Louise, was convinced that she was in desperate straits and badly in need of help. She kept asking me if I might be able to find out about her, to inquire of some mutual friend about her health. Unfortunately Ann Louise was a lost part of my student days, someone I would never see or hear about again. It would take a major effort on my part to establish a connection with her.

Finally Lillian relented and went on to the photograph of Lona. I was pleased she was interested in Ann Louise's welfare, but glad that she had something to say about Lona as well. I wasn't involved with Ann Louise anymore, but Lona still held a part of my attention, even though it was a small, dormant part, which had no object - like a remora without a shark, aimlessly wandering through the

oceans waiting for the shark to reappear but without any hope that it would; the shark was dead, and had floated down to the bottom of the sea to dissolve slowly into the primordial mud.

"I feel the softness that I see in her eyes," Lillian was saying as she studied the picture of Lona in her hands. Lillian's face unconsciously took on the softness of the spirit that she was discussing. I could see the slight changes sweep across her features like sand blowing down the side of a dune.

"I feel also that she could be very, very firm and stubborn in an awful lot of ways," Lillian continued. "I'm going to use the word manipulate, okay. She knew how to get around or work her moods to satisfy people. She was 'on' when she was on, and when she was off, when she was herself ... Ahh," she suddenly sighed. "See, I pick up the tightness in the chest that I get with her, and as I sit here and look at her today, I'm going to say to you that I'm going to go to her right shoulder."

This was the first time that Lillian had mentioned Lona's shoulder, and I paid attention. Something new might be in the offing.

"I feel that there is a definite bruise or there was a bruise on her shoulder, or a marking on her shoulder, okay. And I don't feel that she's trying to tell you anything is bothering her now, but just things that you needed, not necessarily what you wanted. I wanted evidence, but it seemed unlikely that I would get it from her. She would find some reason to refuse the challenge, I was certain. But instead, she picked up the paper as though she had suddenly decided that the spider was not poisonous and examined it more carefully.

Her thumbnail ran down the page like the point of a pencil marking off likely horse-race entries. It stopped now and then, lingering at a name, but seemed to have trouble deciding on the winner. I watched with satisfaction as Lillian failed. Half a minute later, though, she said that she was having some difficulty isolating the right name.

"I would have to go with an L," she finally decided. "It's either Lona Lee ... but I feel that there was an L in her name. I have to go with an L - double Ls in her name, correct or not, I really don't care."

She was simply and purely amazing. I had been sure there was no chance at all that she'd find the name in less than half a dozen tries, no possibility at all - and it had taken her about thirty seconds. She had passed the test as easily as she might light up a cigarette - blindfolded, with one hand tied behind her back. It had been absolutely nothing for her to identify Lona's name among a list of strangers and friends.

I could hardly believe that this was happening. It made no sense at all. It was nothing short of magic with a capital M. I knew that it had been done, but knew just as well that it couldn't have been done without some help from the forces of darkness or from some special ability that I'd never encountered before. It was purely amazing.

I was about to ask another question, but Lillian had already run off into a field of her own choosing, where she was picking daisies rather than evidence. She was talking once more about a chain Lona had worn, a chain which had on it either pearls or small stones. I couldn't remember a necklace like that,

but was not surprised. It had been several years since Lona and I had seen each other regularly, and even if she had such a piece of jewelry, there was no reason for me to recall

The only piece of jewelry that had been important enough for me to notice was her wedding ring. It was a small gold band which had once belonged to Lona's grandmother and with which she also had been married. I'd never been rich enough to afford a diamond engagement ring for her, so the wedding band had been the only symbol of our commitment to each other.

I remembered more vividly than I cared the day on which she'd taken it off. We were separated from each other, and she was seeing Elek at the time. I was visiting the children one weekend, and at the end of the day, while she was preparing to go out for the evening, we'd stood in front of the mirror in the bathroom, talking about what was happening in our respective lives. She had suddenly asked me if I noticed anything different about her. I'd stepped back and sized her up, thinking that she might have a new hair-do or a new piece of clothing that she liked to show off. I noticed nothing, despite the fact that I normally paid a lot of attention to details - I knew how disturbing it was when wives were unable to make an impression on their husband when they had something they wanted him to spot.

Finally she had shoved her hand in front of my face, extending the fingers for my inspection, but I still saw nothing - and that was what she wanted me to see. There were no rings on her fingers. It was exactly what she had in mind. Lona had liberated her hands from the single remaining strand that had held the illusion of our marriage together; she had set herself free from the onus of being married in a world populated by a lot of single parachute jumpers. It was the last barrier between herself and Elek and now it was gone for good. I'd never see that ring again. It was lost or stolen sometime after she married Elek.

I wanted to curtail the meandering and so interrupted with another question. "Where do you see her?" I asked Lillian.

"She's standing directly in back of you," she told me. I was tempted to turn around and see for myself, but knew that Lillian was looking into herself more than into space. I saw nothing other than the lines on Lillian's craggy face, lines born of laughter rather than years.

Lillian ran with the ball again, taking me on a tour of my life to come, talking about stories that I would write, books that I would author, jobs that I would eventually hold, but made no effort to stay with the subject of Lona. I asked if it would be all right to ask more questions.

"Craig, don't peter me out," she said, " 'Cause I'd rather have you come back another Friday, maybe next week when you're around the area or whatever, you know, because I've got to feed these guys at four o'clock." I sensed that to persist with my questions wasn't going to be productive but tried to slip in a few more before the reading was through.

"Can you tell me what my relationship was with this person?" I asked, intent on pursuing the facts of the matter whether Lillian petered out or not.

"I'm going to use the word - now I've got the word all through the whole thing - that the relationship ...



I'm going to use 'love' or 'wife,' 'emotional tie.' I'm not talking about a fleeting relationship, either. A deep relationship, okay. I feel it was your wife, okay. I feel she was married to ,you, okay. All right, go ahead, ask me something else."

Lillian knew nothing more about me now than she had when I first met her - I'd told her nothing, and she'd asked no questions - and yet she was producing increasingly detailed and accurate information about my ex-wife. I couldn't discount the amazing streak of luck she was having in producing results for me. I found myself drawn more and more into the strange novelty of it all. To resist would have been like visiting a carnival and steering clear of the Crazy House because it wasn't something that normally rational people enjoyed. I couldn't turn my back on the experience simply because I was not yet able to explain it. There was still a possibility that I'd discover Lillian's secret somewhere down the road. I knew that I wasn't likely to have to dig for the secret, but I was prepared to dig, if necessary. She wasn't going to deceive me forever. I intended to follow this ridiculous scenario through to some kind of plausible conclusion.

"How long were we married?" I asked, still trying to punch holes in her charade. She didn't wince a bit, but started to answer as soon as "married" was off my lips.

"I don't get time," she admitted, but continued before I could chalk up a failure. "I don't feel it was a long time, okay. I don't think it's long. Now, I get a five - could be the fifth month that she passed or a five-year period or five-month period, but she's giving me a five. So I'm going to say, January, February, March, April, May - May was an important month for her. She really doesn't say, okay."

Lillian had flunked and passed simultaneously. She couldn't tell me how long Lona and I had been married, but had told me that Lona might have died in the month of May. Once before, during the first reading, she had referred to the importance of May and now she had pinpointed the reason. Lona had died then. I didn't know how to enter it on the scorecard - perhaps a draw, but that seemed to be a bit unfair. Lillian obviously deserved credit for the uncanny comment she'd made.

I continued down my list of questions, trying to locate the thread that linked all these incongruous and correct details with which Lillian was stringing me along. It seemed that the spirits were a bit reluctant to dispense facts. They were not, Lillian explained, a candy machine that produced a box of Jujubes every time a quarter was dropped into the slot. They told a person what was helpful or necessary, but did not perform on cue. Facts would occasionally come through she said, but only when some purpose was served by them. When there was no need, as much as I might beg for them, no facts would appear in a reading. It was a matter of finding not what you were searching for but rather what you required, not the sirloin steak that you wanted but the spinach with the iron which your system was short of. I thought it a clever way of avoiding putting up or shutting up. She could continue to con at her pleasure, explaining that anything she couldn't produce wasn't meant to be. It was a fool-proof squelch.

I wondered if there was a way around the use mediums. Would it be possible, I asked Lillian, for to contact spirits directly rather than have to deal with intermediaries? Surprisingly, she suggested that it might be.

"Meditation," she said, as though she were prescribing Excedrin for a headache. I doubted that

meditation, whether transcendental or otherwise, would catapult me into the Beyond, but seemed to recall something similar sparking a strange experience. Then it came to me. The evening that I'd lain in the living room, trying to relax and empty my mind of all conscious thought: that must qualify as meditation of a sort. And what had followed was certainly no ordinary buzz no simple high produced by hyperventilation or too many glasses of wine.

"Meditation, okay," Lillian was saying. "That's the only thing that I feel and that she feels - meditation, complete quiet. Okay, but you can't communicate with her as I am doing."

Oh, no, I thought, I'm sure that I can't. I'm sure that I can't communicate with her at all, any more than you can. It was all an elaborate conceit, a scam designed to lure gullible citizens into Lillian's grasp for whatever purposes she might have. Her purpose obviously wasn't money - she wanted none from me - but it might be for the simple awe that her performances inspired in her clients. Perhaps the performance was all a complicated show choreographed to salve Lillian's ego.

I shelved the suggestion, thinking that I might give it a try, but returned to my lengthy list for the moment. For the time being, Lillian was the one on trial. Perhaps I'd put myself on the docket later, but now it was the medium who was on the witness stand. Why she insisted that I continue with my questions I did not know; obviously she had no intention of answering those she didn't already know the answers to. I was happy -to oblige, however. I went down the list, picking out the ones that seemed most likely to elicit some sort of response. It seemed that the questions striking some responsive chord in Lillian were the ones that had the least meaning for me. She wanted to convey messages that sounded as though they'd been written by Dial-A-Prayer, but I wanted nothing more inspirational for the moment than the time, date, and weather forecast. I needed that more than I needed to know how to change my life to bring it into line with her way of thinking. I saw that asking more questions was a losing proposition, but obliged her anyway. The answers continued to be evasive, at least as far as I was concerned.

I asked about Lona's birthplace and was promptly told, "I won't touch that. I'll touch the ones having to do with location when we have more time, okay."

I asked about our first date, but Lillian insisted on telling me about a rural spot to which I'd move some time in the future. I kept asking for specifics, and she kept giving me non responsive generalities. It was exactly what I'd expected.

"What about sports? Was she interested in any sports?" I persisted.

"Yes, I feel she was very sports-minded," she began, no doubt taking a cue from the question itself. It was unlikely that I'd inquire about sports if Lona had no interest at all in them. I was certain that Lillian would stop there, safe within the obscure, but she plunged on as though she had more information. "I feel definitely she liked planes," she said.

I could hardly believe my ears. I'd asked about sports, and Lillian was answering with an allusion to planes. Planes did not figure prominently, after all, in very many sports. I couldn't stand the suspense as I waited for her to continue.

"She liked air; she liked freedom," Lillian went on, but wandered off into another image. "I want to take her away from the water. She keeps pulling it down too small for me ... so I'm going to say 'snow,' and I feel that she'd have been active, and I see her going down a slope and ..." She slapped the kitchen table a swat that would have broken the back of a mortal and shouted, "Skiing! I feel that she used her feet."

Lona had enjoyed two sports that I was aware of. One was skydiving, and the other was skiing. Lillian's was a remarkable guess by anybody's standards. I couldn't imagine how she had done it. Tennis or golf might have been a safe guess, but skydiving and skiing! They were hardly a likely combination, the sort of thing that four out of five Americans enjoyed. The number was more like one in a million, if that. I couldn't accept the old saw about an infinite number of monkeys sitting at an infinite number of typewriters eventually typing up all the world's literature by accident. Lillian was one woman who didn't bear the faintest resemblance to any monkey I'd ever heard about. She was a pleasant-looking woman, whose face and stark moods suddenly seemed homey, as much a part of this strange series of events as they could possibly be. She seemed an appropriate fixture for the intensely playful situation.

I sensed that she was getting tired and was afraid that we'd run out of time before I'd had a chance to get any more responsive answers, so I slipped another one into her lap. "Can you tell me how she died?" I asked.

"I feel that she died with something through her chest," Lillian remarked, without seriously considering the question. "I get a shortness of breath, okay. I'm going to say to you that I see this swirl, and I'm going to say strings, and every tune you mention her death, what I see is string. Whether it had something to do with parachuting or whether it had something to do with strings or with a plane..."

"I still get this ... The minute that you came in today, I get that tightness across my chest. My lungs get full. I feel that there was a bruise though, okay, on her shoulder, so I'm going to say fall. Can't tell you how, but I get trees. I get the fall and I get a bruise, okay. Give me a couple more questions, and we can pick it up later."

I was in shock. If there was a one in a million chance of Lillian's telling me about planes and skiing when I asked about Lona and sports, there was a one in a billion chance that she'd describe a parachuting accident when I asked about her death. In the entire United States, there was no more than a handful of fatal accidents each year. Remarkably, skydiving is one of the safest sports around; it is placed somewhere below running as a hazardous activity. But when you make a mistake, it is generally your last one. The ground is not very forgiving. When you hit it, you are traveling at something in the vicinity of a hundred miles per hour without a seat belt or shoulder harness to slow you down. It is a one-way ticket to oblivion.

Lillian seemed to sense my amazement, but I kept my emotions in check, trying to prevent my sudden start from giving her clues to her success. I needed to stop her from embroidering the lucky guess she'd managed. It would have been a simple matter for her to construct a plausible tale about a parachuting accident if she knew that she'd struck paydirt, but I didn't give her the opportunity. I proceeded to my next question as though I was anxious to leave this subject behind.

"I'm going to kind of cool it for today," Lillian informed me, saying that she was beginning to run out of energy, but noting that I was free to return on the following Friday if I liked. I thanked her, but seemed unable to refrain from asking questions. I asked whether Lona had tried to contact me, if she had invaded my dreams or filled my body with chills; but Lillian was adamant.

"Your questions don't bother me," she explained, "but sometimes when you throw them out, the spirit will pull back because of the factual element. Facts can be upsetting, okay. You may think that you want to hear all of this, but you might not be ready for it. It'll come out when it's supposed to come out and it will be an important part of your life, but it will come when the tune is right, not before."

Lillian had put the cap on the afternoon; she was not about to be seduced into performing further. She was drained and needed to recharge her psychic batteries. I sympathized, but felt as though I was once more going home with less than I'd bargained for, filled with more questions than I'd had when I arrived. I wanted proof, incontrovertible proof, if Lona existed and was able to speak to me through Lillian. I'd gotten lots of evidence, but nothing that I couldn't explain away by employing the ESP hypothesis. If any of the material she'd produced had any meaning for someone other than myself, I'd be surprised. The material was impressive to me, but to others it would seem that I'd supplied Lillian with all the answers, either by subconsciously clueing her in or by showing small, telltale emotions that had helped her scout a path through my desire for Lona's spirit to communicate with me. I may have found it impossible to believe I had helped Lillian, but this was a reasonable stance for any outsider to assume. I would have offered just that opinion if I'd been asked to assess someone else's equally unlikely story. But I knew that I wasn't serving as the source of these remarkable insights into my own life.

I told Julie bits and pieces of the information that had come out during the reading. I wanted to make her a part of what was happening to me, but at the same time didn't want to make her feel that one marriage was rising from the grave in order to threaten the other. I told her enough for her to be aware of the significance of the situation, but not so much that she'd begin to dwell on it.

We'd decided early on not to tell the girls anything about what I was doing. We did not want to confuse their lives with the supernatural. It was bad enough that it was tainting my existence and touching on Julie's; we weren't going to let it interfere with them. Joanne had had a close encounter with the unknown, and it had shaken her briefly, and I wasn't going to encourage others. Nadine, fortunately, was still secure in the blanket of her disbelief in a hereafter; there was no sense in telling her that her mother was hanging around trying to prove otherwise.

I spent several days putting together a proposal for another book project, but wasn't able to work at it as I would have liked. As I sat at my desk, putting down my thoughts about the multiple homicides, my mind kept drifting back to the episodes with Lillian and the other mediums. I still found myself amazed by all of it, by the repeated references to an infant brother, to a grandfather, to Lona, and, in the last case, by the wealth of detail that had gradually accumulated. I'd now been told about Lona's appearance, her lifestyle, her personality, her smile, her relationship to me, and even, in some remarkable way, about her death. All this was beginning to add up to something resembling a fact of nature, if not a fact ready for the textbooks. I found myself leaning toward a belief in something more than I'd ever considered believing in before - a belief in the possibility that some small portion of the

human personality survived the encounter with death and remained accessible to those who remained behind. To believe was a death-defying leap of faith over the hurdle of my remaining doubts and one that I was not yet willing to undertake, but one that seemed less and less formidable.

I was also forced to confront even more strange developments, some of which were taking place within my home. I'd gone to bed one evening, and shortly after falling asleep had been awakened by a loud thud, as though someone had taken a large book and thrown it down flat on the bedroom floor. I leaped out of bed, flicked on the light, and looked around the room. Nothing was on the floor. I sensed that something was out of place in some inexplicable way, but nothing about my surroundings confirmed the suspicion. I'd returned to bed, blaming it on my imagination or a dream aborning. I thought no more about it until the following evening.

I was working downstairs, while Julie was reading in bed upstairs. All of a sudden, I heard her scream - a loud, senseless yell, which lifted me out of my chair and had me halfway up the stairs before she'd concluded. I knew Julie and her fears well and imagined that the cat had carried a mouse into our bedroom or some other similar catastrophe had occurred, but found her alone, shaking, in our safe little lair.

"Something was just thrown against the wall of Nadine's room," she stammered.

Nadine's bedroom and ours shared a wall, and Julie explained that she had just heard something crash against it loudly and distinctly. Just as I was getting used to selling her on the reality of my experiences, she had begun to have experiences of her own. I'd been in the basement, directly beneath Nadine's room, and had heard nothing, absolutely nothing. But I rushed into Nadine's room anyway. When it came to my wife or daughters, I didn't take any chances. There was a large hanging plant in Nadine's room, and I'd often worried about its falling on top of her while she was sleeping; I doubted that it had, but I had to check. As I entered the room, I immediately noticed the familiar smell of Lona's perfume; Windsong once more scented the room,

I turned on the light, trying not to wake Nadine, and glanced around, looking for anything that might have fallen, but there was nothing. I also searched for a bottle of perfume in case Nadine had been playing with one, but there was none. I thought of the earlier experience in this room and found myself rerunning that episode. "Lona?" I asked inside my mind. And immediately there was a reply - chills that crawled up my spine like spiders scaling a wall before the sun can sizzle them. I was satisfied that something was happening, but didn't want to linger in Nadine's room.

I returned to my bedroom, reassured Julie, explaining that the noise had probably been the sound of a backfiring car, and went back downstairs. I sat down in front of my fledgling proposal and started to work again; but soon the chills returned, stroking the length of my body with wintry breezes. I waited for them to pass, anxious to resume my chore, but they persisted and seemed slowly to grow stronger. Finally I set my pen aside, closed my eyes, and tried to establish contact with whatever was trying to reach me. I thought of nothing, emptying my mind in the same way as I might empty an ashtray, and tried to let the outside source seep into my subconscious, then percolate up to the conscious. My efforts had little effect. The chills continued to occur periodically, but nothing else developed.

Finally I grew slightly annoyed and told the spirits, or whatever they were, that while I was anxious to let them speak to me if they could, I didn't have all night. The proposal was already overdue and required my attention that evening.

"If you want to say something, say it," I told them. "If not, leave me alone. Maybe we can take this up in a couple of days, but I've got work to do tonight" A short while later, the chills went away. It was bad enough that I was feeling and smelling things that didn't exist; now sound had been added to the panoply of phenomena. I couldn't imagine what was in store for me next and wasn't particularly interested in finding out. Nonetheless, two days after the reading with Lillian, I found myself drawn to the basement to try to restore the connection with the other side.

It was nearly one o'clock in the morning before I was able to begin. I would have liked to have begun earlier, but there were certain advantages to waiting until then. Everyone else was asleep, so I wouldn't be interrupted, the house was quiet, so I wouldn't mistake natural for unnatural phenomena, and the traffic in front of the house was now nearly nil.

I lay down on the bed in my office and once more attempted to tune out the constant stream of words and pictures that normally drifted through my mind. It was getting warmer now, but I left the windows closed, not willing to risk the chance that the icy chill I felt was simply the result of a breeze coming into contact with bare skin. I chose to isolate myself from outside sensations in order to be more receptive to inner ones, if it was possible to do so. I had my doubts.

As I drifted off into a mindless cloud of communion with my soul, I left the world of daily concerns and cares behind. It was a sort of bliss, a state in which sensations seemed to matter more than thought, where feelings took priority over more ordinary musings by one's brain.

"I have noticed that my eyes begin to pulsate," I told the tape recorder at my side, starting to chronicle my gradual decline into a world of striking impressions devoid of reason and resisting explanation. "I see a very pale color, a blue-green color. I still see the color." A single bulb burned in the basement, and at first it had filtered through my eyelids as the sunlight flickers through a window shade, but now, for no Sensible reason, I found myself seeing those blue-green lights that I'd first seen the last time I'd lain in this bed. Perhaps it had something to do with the proximity of the streetlamp outside the office window. I turned my head toward the wall experimentally, facing into the darkness, but the lights persisted. Perhaps I wasn't watching my diet as closely as I should and saw spots because of a vitamin deficiency.

The muscles next to my eyes began to flinch, to tighten into hard little knots, then gently relax, as though someone was pinching the flesh between their fingers, then letting go. I seemed to be suffering from Parkinson's disease now. I made a mental note to check with my doctor if these strange symptoms persisted.

"My eyes are wincing again," I said to the tape recorder, "and the muscles across the top of the eye are constricting somewhat painfully."

The muscular pressure was becoming quite intense, as though someone had shot me up with a muscle

stimulant that was putting my muscles through their paces without any help from me. I couldn't control what they were doing any more than I could control my own heartbeat by thinking about it.

Inside the eyelids, the visual images changed swiftly, suddenly swirling from a patch of blue-green mists into a patchwork quilt of colors that boggled the inner eye. I watched with amusement as the light show proceeded as though I were staging my own interior disco; all that was missing was the music. I slipped down into the soft pillows of light and enjoyed the experience, at the same time noting that my face was being distorted by the pressure of the clenching muscles - a pleasant combination of pain and bliss, something like the feeling that must turn sado-masochists on,

"There's pain, particularly in the left eye," I observed. "The pain across the top of the eyes is rather considerable - this faint pain on the left outside socket of the left eye, and on the right forehead. The pain sort of stretches between those two points. I feel pain on the right side of my face between the top of the cheek and the top of the hairline. There's a very distorted feeling to my face," I suddenly realized. "It's as though the right-hand side of the face has been bent into a half-moon shape with the opening toward the left. The head feels misshaped. The pain is still present on the right side." As I spoke, I realized that I was having an unusually difficult time differentiating between my left and my right. I'd feel a pain on the left side of my face, but would say that it was on the opposite side, as though I was looking into a mirror; the sensation that I felt on one side of my face I saw on the other. I seemed to find myself on two sides of the looking glass at the same tune.

After a while, I began to notice unfamiliar pains in other parts of my body.

"Both of my hands and arms feel virtually nonexistent," I noted with amazement at one point, finding that they seemed to have floated away. "It's as though, it's as though the nerves have been severed at the shoulders - completely devoid of feeling. There's a similar feeling in the right leg; I have an impression of bruises along that area." I also had an impression that my imagination was beginning to take over the proceedings, that I was subconsciously beginning to mimic Lillian Ventura's act. I was going to describe physical trauma that might be consistent with what I knew about the accident. It was funny, though - I didn't want to be doing this, but obviously this was what distinguished the conscious from the subconscious.

I studied the sensations more closely, trying to observe and describe them precisely, so that if any of them were accurate accounts of injuries that Lona had sustained, I'd be able to match them with the autopsy report later. I must have sounded like a chronic hypochondriac conducting inventory of his aches and pains.

"There's a pain in the middle of my back, right up my spine, and it's throbbing. It's a sharp pain, slightly above the halfway point on the left side of the spine. It's throbbing very sharply. It's a throbbing pain in the muscle just to the left of the spine at that point. It's subsiding now."

I knew that Lona's spine had been broken, so it would have been no great shakes to fantasize a pain in the center of my back; the one thing that elicited my interest was the position of the pain. I had no idea where the break had occurred, so I could either confirm or dismiss my impression later. Either way, checking would indicate something.

"The pressure on the right side of my head is still there," I observed, "very faint, but still there. It's as though someone is resting their hand on that spot and exerting a constant pressure. Now I'm becoming distinctly aware of a pain directly beneath my breastbone. I'm aware of a pulsing, a rather quick pulsing in my right cheek and a similar, less frequent pulsing above my right eye." I was really getting into it now, I thought, not only noting symptoms, but beginning to link them to particular traumas.

"The pulsing seems to relate to my heart; I'm making a mental tie to blood and to bleeding at these points ... on the face. I'm aware of a pulse in the inside of my hands, the palm of my hands, across my chest and upper arm. I feel a distinct pressure across my Adam's apple and a pulse in my throat. ... It's as though someone has their hands around my windpipe and is choking me."

This, I realized, had to be the result of my knowing that Lona had been strangled. I'd read that much in the autopsy report and now I was imagining what it was like to be strangled. I wondered when the symptoms of the other multiple injuries extremis would show up. I was convinced that all these sensations were the work of my own mind, but they were tremendously persuasive nonetheless. If my experiences had been part of a Broadway production, I would have given it a most favorable review for special effects.

"I'm still aware of the choking sensation in my throat. It's like having an Adam's apple, a lump in one's throat. There's a certain loss of air, a loss of ability to breathe; it's like a memory of being choked by a playmate." And that, I thought, was exactly what it was: a very vivid memory of some childhood playmate strangling me during a game of cops and robbers resurrected from the recesses of my mind in order to impersonate my dying ex-wife. I wasn't enjoying the substitution at all.

"Also feeling a constriction of muscles in the left leg as though the knee wants to flex up," I continued cataloguing my growing list of infirmities. "Both knees seem to want to lift up, as though into a sitting position. I have a feeling that the knees were pressed up close to the body when it was on the ground. A fairly sharp, well-defined pain in the left kneecap," I gasped, feeling as though someone had taken a ballpeen hammer to that knee. "There's a pain in the muscle of the upper right arm - it's like a tearing sensation; it's as though the muscle is really being torn, really being ripped. My arms feel as though they are relatively straight at my sides; my legs, however, want to bend up a bit, want to be in more of a seated position - a seated position. It's as though all of these symptoms advance one by one, and then retreat but remain on the sidelines. I'm aware of all of them, but at any given moment one of them predominates, seems to hold forth on center stage."

I was going to have to be very careful never to let these tapes fall into the wrong hands, I mused to myself. Anyone listening to them would think either that my body was self-destructing or that I'd had a mental breakdown. And the latter would be the most reasonable explanation possible, I granted. But I wasn't making these feelings up, certainly not of my own volition. The pain, at times, was excruciating, but somehow, no matter how intense, it always seemed divorced from me, as though it was the pain of someone else. I felt it, but I wasn't moved by it. At the same time, I retained a belief that I would be able to turn the symptoms off if I elected to do so. At one point, I had experimented, willing the pain in my forehead away, and it had disappeared; as soon as I relaxed my mental admonition, however, it had returned. I might still be the ringmaster, but the tigers, it seemed, were anxious to get at me.



"I feel my arms sort of being pushed in, and although they're still by my sides, they're being sort of pushed in towards one another across the surface of my chest, sort of busting my chest in - pressing the chest in.

"There's a sharp pain beneath my breastbone," I noted with some alarm, wondering if this experience was precipitating a heart attack - not an illusory one, but a real, live, personal one of my own. "There's a pain on the inside of the upper right thigh, a long, tearing pain. The legs are slowly twitching towards one another. My mouth is open. There's a strong pain on the front left side of my throat; I get a cutting pain. It's a choking pain, as though somebody's not just playing at choking but is really choking me, particularly on that left side. It's as though the windpipe and the flesh have been smashed flat there, The legs are still jerking a bit. The pressure is becoming much more intense in the lower thigh.

"I think I'd like to stop now," I finally groaned into the tape recorder, as exhausted by the ordeal I was going through as by anything I'd ever experienced. I was ready to quit, I wanted to wipe these pains away like dirt off a windshield, so that I could proceed on course with my life. I wasn't getting any younger lying here in bed - if anything, I'd put on a decade since I'd lain down. I needed to save myself while there was still something to save.

I consciously tried to dismiss whatever was haunting my body, straining my floorboards, and bending my beams this way. Good-bye. Good night, I said to it, hoping that it would take my not-too-subtle hint. If it didn't, I thought, I'm in an awful lot of trouble; I tried to imagine writing at my desk with my body going berserk, and found it a bit unlikely.

I consciously tried to push back the phenomena, to erase their scars from my body, and after a few minutes I found that they were receding like the stars at the break of day. Slowly, one by one, the symptoms faded from my consciousness, disappeared down the dark hole from which they'd sprung. I was relieved to have them on their way. The possibility that they might intend to hang around had pushed up my blood pressure by at least ten points and would have wreaked havoc with my life insurance rates.

As I drifted back toward the waiting, if sleeping, world, I felt a few light chills waft over me, like the caress of a mother tucking her child in for the evening. They were a pleasant, reassuring sensation, not at all like most of those I'd felt this night. I was a candidate for a coffin rather than bed, but eventually I managed to pry myself away from the unsprung mattress to try out the newer one upstairs.

Julie was waiting for me, sleeping peacefully, blissfully, unaware of what I'd been through. I looked at her lying there, her long dark hair spilling over the white of the pillow, the fingers of her tiny hand holding onto the covers like a child's, and contemplated how lovely and lucky she was. She didn't have to worry about comparisons between her and Lona. She was clearly prettier ... and she was alive. What more could I really ask for? I wondered. I might have a hard time living with her temper, but as long as she was alive, there was hope that the situation might improve. I leaned over her and stroked her forehead, pushing the hair back from her face. She had the blackest eyebrows I'd ever seen; they seemed to have been stenciled into place. The lashes were just as dark, and her cheeks were full and rosy with the blush of the June sun. She was a remarkably beautiful woman, and I was glad that she was mine.

I said a little prayer of thanks for her. I wasn't sure whom it was directed to, but offered it anyway. Julie, like Lona, was a miracle unto herself, one that I might never understand, but a miracle nonetheless. And miracles were not meant to be sneezed at.

It had been a grueling evening, and I was anxious for the oblivion of sleep, anxious to slip down into the nothingness of slumber, all the way to the bottom of the dark well. I slipped into bed beside Julie, curling up behind her, my arms draped over her side. She was my favorite and most formidable hot-water bottle, a comforter in times of trouble and too often a trouble in times of comfort. I "wouldn't have wanted it otherwise; life would have become too boring without Julie's occasional histrionics.

She grumbled in her sleep, pulled my arm about her more tightly, and together the two of us said good-bye to the thrills and chills of the day.

## Chapter Eight

The nights were shorter now, the days longer, and I found myself gravitating toward the outdoors. I wanted to chase a spot in the sun for myself, to spend some time in my garden, to do a bit of fishing in the Glades, a rocky outcrop of land not too far from my home. This was a beautiful place, one of the loveliest I'd ever seen, and I wound up going there often and talking to myself "out loud. I needed someone to talk to, but the world of the writer is a solitary one, and I had few close friends with whom I felt free to discuss what was going on. I spent my energy in the pursuit of some inner resolution, looking to myself for the answers, not to the outside world.

But I knew I would have to spend more time in search of Lona, or in search of more strange experiences at the very least. I had another appointment with Lillian, but wasn't ready to see her yet; I was still recovering from our last encounter. The following Friday was soon enough for me. If I'd be ready for her then I didn't yet know. I might have to postpone the appointment for the sake of my own sanity. Meanwhile, I worked on the tasks at hand, completing a magazine piece and refining the proposal further. I took the proposal to another writer with whom I'd collaborated on the murder magazine article and had her take a look at it. She wanted to make some changes, and so I left it in her keeping. If it worked out, the book might have a fair chance of doing well in the marketplace, I thought, but in journalism, one's expectations are frequently grander than the payoffs. It isn't a business in which one makes money; it is a business in which one earns ulcers, and becomes an alcoholic if one intends to keep one's reason.

I had hopes that it would work out well, though, and waited to hear from my colleague. While I waited for her to finish her revisions, I talked with editors about other possibilities and obtained several assignments for other articles. It was nice to know that one's work was appreciated, even if the pay left something to be desired. The life of a free-lance journalist is unlike that of a newspaper reporter, for instance, in that the reporter receives a paycheck whether or not he produces every day; a free-lance writer, on the other hand, waits for weeks before finding out whether or not the work he's submitted has been accepted, then waits weeks more for the checks to come.

It is nerve-wracking when the bills are overdue, but has its rewards. I was free to work when I chose, was able to travel sometimes when the story was set in other sections of the country, and had no boss breathing down my neck; it was a nice way to earn a living, but not a luxurious one, unfortunately.

I had heard that the owners of the New York magazine I'd been writing for were changing their attorneys since the alleged rapist's attorneys seemed to be scoring more points in court than theirs were. I had never really gotten to know the attorneys, who were representing me as well as the magazine, and wasn't inclined to start raising issues which I knew nothing about. I went along with the magazine's decision, grateful that it not I, was bearing the legal expense. In July, I received a letter from the magazine's publisher stipulating who the new lawyers would be and asking me to sign a consent form so that they could represent me legally as well.

I didn't think much about it at the time and set the form aside to take care of later. In August, it caught my eye, and I took it out, filled in the blanks, and then took it to a local notary to be notarized. As I stood in his office, I suddenly recalled Lillian's remark. She'd said something about a legal problem,

which would come to the surface again in August and would require the services of a notary.

Here I stood in a notary's office, having him authenticate a form that released my former attorneys from their duties and appointed new ones in their stead. I didn't know if this was what Lillian had seen in my future, but the details coincided so closely that I found the coincidence impossible to ignore. I filed the observation away, wondering whether, as Lillian had indicated, the libel suit would be resolved in November. I hoped that it would be, and in my favor. The obligation of paying an alleged rapist twelve million dollars grated on my sense of right and wrong; if anyone should have been making retribution, it was him, not me. It wasn't my fault that the story had embarrassed him during election year; he'd known about the allegations long before he'd ever run for public office. They were something he had to face up to at some point, and now was as good as another. I wanted to see his face when the jury told him its decision. I was certain that we would win - the story had been prepared as carefully as any I'd ever written and had been edited even more scrupulously - but doubted that we would. The matter would probably be resolved among attorneys long before then, anyway.

I had hoped that the truce between Julie and me would last for a while, but it was strained already. On June 15, we attended a gymnastic program in which Nadine was appearing, and it turned into a minor disaster. Nadine was playing the prima donna, and Julie was playing the major domo.

When we got home, I chucked the girls into bed like hot potatoes, anxious to terminate the night's unpleasantness as soon as possible, and talked with Julie, trying to calm her down. The evening had been trying for everyone, but nothing had happened that required us to go to war; I just wanted some common sense to permeate our defenses.

Julie went to bed first, and I followed an hour later. I had to settle down myself. Finally I went into the bedroom and slid between the covers like a piece of baloney between slices of white bread. I was glad of the chance to escape the toil of the day.

But the travails weren't quite ready to let me be. I'd been lying in bed for half an hour, unable to fall to sleep quickly, when I suddenly heard a series of sharp thumps in Nadine's room, as though she were hitting the floor with her fist or as though someone pounding on the door. The noise was loud and unmistakable, the sound of someone thumping away with their feet or their fists. I was startled by it and jumped up to investigate - this wasn't the proper time to be making like a kettledrum. I ran into Nadine's bed room, fully prepared to take her across my knee, something I never did when things were running normally, but tonight, I thought, would be an exception, I came through the door like a bear on a rampage, having had my fill of anguish for the moment, but found Nadine sleeping in her bed. I searched around the room, but found nothing out of place. It wasn't the first time that unexplained occurrences had happened in this bedroom but it was the first time that they'd taken this form.

I returned to bed, wondering what I could expect next. Nothing more than a good night's sleep, I hoped.

I got my wish, but two nights later, the noises returned. Julie and I had gone to bed and were lying in the dark, enjoying the cool breeze of night air that was slaking the heat of the day. It was a pleasant,

soothing sigh of air, sending curtains aflutter and rustling beneath our sheets.

Suddenly there was an explosion at the foot of the bed, a sound so unexpected that both Julie and I leaped up, thinking that something had struck the house. I sensed that something had happened, but strongly suspected that I'd find nothing out of order in the room. As usual, I was wrong. A copy of Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, which I'd left on top of the chest of drawers, was now lying flat on the floor at the foot of the bed. I picked it up and flipped through its pages. I'd been reading the book for a few days and had put it on top of several others before going to bed.

Julie was horrified. "I'm scared," she announced to me. "Make your ghosts go a,way." It was a little joke, but Julie was not completely amused.

I was more anxious to allay her fears than to understand what had happened, and told her that the book had been sitting at a sharp angle and, blown by the wind, had fallen to the floor; it had not, but I didn't know what else to say. It seemed a plausible explanation, and Julie bought it, though a bit reluctantly. What she really thought, whether she was convinced that Lona's spirit had now invaded our bedroom or not, I'd never know. If she thought so, she kept it to herself, refining her worry in her mind like a polishing machine smoothing rocks, gradually taking the sharp edges off to make a comfortable sheen of pain instead. The following day, I didn't think to ask her what she really thought, but she seemed to be feeling fine, and I let the matter drop. There was no point in further inciting her latent fears.

The next night, I was tempted to try to communicate with the forces in my basement once more, but resisted, hoping to hold onto my equilibrium a bit longer. I went to bed as usual, but once more found it difficult to get to sleep, which was quite strange for me. Normally I drifted off soon after I got into bed. Finally I found that I had to return to the bathroom, and when I did, was suffused with several strong chills similar to those I'd felt on earlier occasions. I'd done nothing to prompt them and was puzzled by their unsought appearance here in front of the toilet, but I wasn't willing to pursue the puzzle further. I ignored them, driving them from my mind like a homeowner driving squatters from a front yard, and returned to bed.

It seemed that even when I least wished it, the paranormal persisted in making its presence known. I wasn't sure that I appreciated its persistence, but admired its gall.

The next night, though, I relented. I went down into the basement and tried to get in touch with whatever had been hounding me the night before. The room was gloomy, but the sweet spring air made it more inviting. I sat down on the edge of the bed, and after acclimatizing myself to the surroundings, reached over and turned off the light - the fewer inputs there were to my senses, I reasoned, the less likely that my five senses would respond. If there was no light in the room, I wasn't going to see any when I shut my eyes. If I did, Con Edison was going to want to hear about it. Light they couldn't charge you for was akin to a Communist plot. I lay back on the bed, shut my eyes, and enjoyed the lack of uncanny sensations. I felt the cool sheet beneath my back, heard the whirr of passing cars outside, and smelled the odor of the saltwater pond across the street. I felt nothing that was other than normal. Each sensation, each feeling, belonged to a specific source, a natural pearl on the string of cause and effect. I indulged myself with the fine ambience of the moment, drifting along

like a log on a tidal current toward a dark and unseen sea. I didn't know where I was heading, but for the moment I didn't care; it was enough to feel so good.

My sensory vacation was short-lived, however, for, just as I was beginning to think that the idea of seeking Lona this way was insane, the strange experience began to happen all over again - the chills, the swirling lights inside my head. I opened my eyes, wondering if I'd finally run out of subconscious special effects, but was surprised to find that the optical effects lingered. As I lay on my back, looking up in the direction of the ceiling, I saw a pale, violet-colored mist floating between me and the black backdrop; it was as though a fog machine had been rolled in while my eyes were closed and was now filling my field of vision with Day-Glo purple haze.

It wasn't a clear picture, but rather something that I seemed to see - a light coming out of the air itself, being distilled from the atmosphere like beads of dew - and I tried to convince myself that it was merely the result of eyestrain or some other normal physiological response. I tried, but couldn't quite convince myself; I blinked my eyes several times, trying to wash the haze away with a few refreshing tears, but it persisted.

Finally, however, I tired of watching it. I might have been sitting at a drive-in movie while the projectionist played with a set of gels, filling the screen with soft colors - the view was interesting at first, but the novelty soon wore thin.

Nothing else seemed to be happening, either. The night was proving to be a washout, but I remained for a while, thinking that perhaps it was taking longer to get the motor running this evening. But after half an-hour of fruitless waiting, I decided to put the tap recorder away.

"I'm going to stop," I said. "I don't think anything's going to happen tonight."

It was reassuring to be right for a change, but that novelty too would soon be forgotten. I was afraid I was about to plunge into the paranormal like a cannon ball into the whirlwind. I didn't want to reach a point of no return, beyond which the only way was ahead and the only source of direction the sun setting behind me.

I wasn't ready for Lillian again and telephoned to tell her so. She seemed relieved by the unexpected hole in her schedule, indicating that she had wanted to do some shopping with her daughter, but invited me to a lesson she was conducting in her backyard bungalow the following Thursday. Ironically, this was the first day of summer.

The lesson, for all practical purposes, was a seance, a gathering of twenty people who were interested in developing their psychic powers and testing their abilities in the presence of more experienced mediums. Lillian and several others monitored the impressions that the students were receiving and the readings they produced, helping them to refine their expertise. It was sort of a seminar for screwballs, I thought that evening as I drove toward Holbrook, judging in advance what I was going to find.

The students were precisely what I expected - a group of Lillian lookalikes, middle-income women

with frosted fingernails and slacks that fitted them like a second skin. There were only two men in the room, neither of whom would have been placed in a movie star stand-in contest. One man seemed one step short of lapsing into a coma, while the other was a stocky and gregarious young man with cheeks that looked like inflated balloons. He smiled broadly when he saw me walk in, no doubt pleased to see another conscious male in a room full of females. I sat down by the door, thinking that I could slip out without disturbing the proceedings if I found them too depressing.

The room was small and inordinately cozy, given the fact that more than twenty people were squeezed into it tonight. They formed two circles, lined the walls, perched on tabletops, and sat in front of the wood stove across from me. Lillian, sitting at the corner of the inner circle, smiled and waved, genuinely glad to see me.

It was a lovely night outside, but the room soon filled with the smoke of a bonfire of cigarettes, and I opened the window behind me to stoke my senses with fresh oxygen. As I glanced around the room, I wondered what drew these people to Lillian two evenings each week, wondered what they found that brought them back again and again. I had thought that these people probably fell into a single category, but as I listened to them talk to one another, I realized that I'd been premature with my judgment. Among the group were teachers, a nurse, a regional representative for a cosmetics company, a state policewoman, a judge, and other professionals. Appearances were obviously deceiving. I'd figured them all for Woolworths salesgirls or self-service gas station attendants.

I apologized for my presumption in silence.

Lillian ran around the room each time a new person came in, introducing each newcomer to the rest of the class, then slid back into a personal conversation. The crowd spent half an hour chatting and exhausting their cigarette supplies before Lillian finally called them to order. There was some grumbling, but soon they all settled back into their chairs and listened as Lillian read some mystical gobbledygook from a Spiritualist handbook. As I listened, I was struck by the nonsense of it all. It reminded me of Buddhist koans or vaudeville doubletalk; the words were wonderful, but, at least to the untrained ear, as empty as the shells on a barroom floor.

We weren't going to accomplish much, if this was all that was involved in the lessons, I thought to myself, as Lillian concluded her uninspirational reading. To my delight, she then explained that we would soon be turning out the lights and sitting in a seance. I'd attended a seance once before, when I was researching an article for a newspaper, but it had been a shabby, halfhearted affair held in someone's bedroom. It had neither impressed me nor held the faintest candle up to the darkness of the hereafter.

I was pleased to have another chance to observe a bit of anachronistic folk magic, an American pastime as old and as honorable as sitting around a fire telling stories about Paul Bunyan. It might not prove as interesting as Charlie's Angels, but at least there would be no commercials.

After Lillian had extinguished the lights, I stared into the blackness in front of me, trying to make out the outlines of people sitting, across from me, seeing whether they'd moved or were busy hooking up tape recorders and slide projectors to amaze me with special spirit presences. It seemed that everyone

was still in place. My skepticism seemed a bit overreactive, in any case. The only one in the room who knew that I was a writer was Lillian. She'd made a point of not telling the rest anything other than my first name. This was the standard code of behavior within the group. Individuals became friends, but inquired little about other people's life and background. For the most part, they knew no more about one another than their jobs and what had arisen during these sessions.

Lillian had explained that she consciously attempted to minimize what she knew about a person she was reading for; weighing the message she received against known facts tended to interfere with the message. Instead, she preferred to work in the dark, as it were, merely relaying the inner-life transmissions she received without any criteria to judge them by. I appreciated the practice, since it removed the likelihood of fraud, if only a little.

Soon my eyes had grown accustomed to the dark, and I could make out the outlines of most of the people in the room. They were sitting in a large circle around a small patch of floor, where my tape recorder was silently transcribing their every comment. I once more thanked the inventor of the Panasonic portable, thinking how impossible it would have been for me to take notes under the circumstances.

The seance procedure was a loose one. We sat quietly, waiting for Lillian or one of the other mediums or for any one of the students to receive a psychic impression. When they did, they would announce whom it was for and then deliver the message. It was something like playing post office, I guessed, but with all the players in the same room. I privately hoped for a special delivery letter with postage due.

The messages, for the most part, were banal, and did little more than keep the seance rolling.

"Your grandmother wants you to know that she is always near you and wants you to take your vitamins; it's very important."

"A tall dark man is going to offer to help you with a project in and around your work, but you should refuse; he doesn't have your best interests at heart."

The messages were the sort of thing you expected to find inside a Chinese fortune cookie, but hardly the type of communication that was likely to inspire a strong belief in life after death. I wondered if the spirits ever spoke in anything other than generalities.

"I have a message for you," said one of the younger women, a short, attractive brunette, who sat in the dark corner opposite me.

"Craig, give her your voice, honey. It helps her to focus in on you," Lillian interjected.

"Yes," I said, my voice nervous with the unexpectedness of being asked to do something other than sit silently, observing what was happening.

"I got a fireplace," the girl told me, "a red-brick fireplace. There were tools that go to stoke a fire - a



shovel and everything - and then they turned into a croquet set - you know, the kind you play with a ball...."

Fascinating, I thought, if also completely off the wall. The picture made absolutely no sense to me. The red-brick fireplace could easily have been a green De-Soto, and the croquet set a ball of wax. It was interesting, but completely intangible, completely interior. It existed inside her mind, but had no relevance to me or to my life.

"Okay," Lillian suddenly interrupted, "I would say to Craig that I feel that the fireplace is symbolic of a feeling of comfortableness around him, and I see the spirit too, and I'm sure that he knows who it is, so I'm not going to describe her. I feel that there was a feeling of comfortableness, peacefulness, with her, almost like the music of toasting marshmallows, but this would go from this sort of tranquillity out into a sports-type situation. She was a romanticist as well as a sportswoman."

This was an accurate description of Lona and was represented by her two marriages. Once, when we were driving through Texas, I bought some penny candy and picked a few roses from someone's front lawn for Lona. I gave them to her and told her jokingly, "Stick with me, kid, and you'll never want for roses and penny candy." It was just a small, intense slice of affection and seemed to become a symbol of our relationship; roses and penny candy, that was what we were about.

But Elek was a jumper, not a composer of small pieces of freeform poetry. He was the other side of Lona's coin, the side of her that I'd ignored at the expense of my marriage. She needed to be active, to channel her energy into physical outlets, and I hadn't provided them. I'd fed her roses and penny candy even when she wanted thrills and chills. I'd learned about my mistake too late. Lillian had hit on a crucial weakness in our marriage, but inadvertently, I was sure.

It was a graceful save, though - Lillian had taken the other woman's fireplace and croquet set and turned them into a little story that I couldn't deny.

"I don't know if I should bring this up," the young man with the cherubic cheeks was saying.

"Go ahead. Go right ahead," Lillian told him, like a master statistician scrutinizing the moves of an apprentice accountant.

"I'm in an airplane," he resumed, obviously anxious about what he was feeling.

"Where do you feel the message goes?" Lillian asked him.

"Craig," he said, bringing me forward on my chair. I tried to make him out in the corner of the room.

"I'm in an airplane that - it's crispy - it's a crispy morning," he said. I sat entranced, waiting for his next word, sure it would destroy the effect that he was now building within me, but not really wanting to see the illusion suffer the cold light of reason so soon.

"And I'm falling," he continued, sending my blood pressure up another two points. "And I can see a city in the distance ... and I feel like I can see mountains, and I feel ground, and I'm falling and

something's wrong, and I get ... I get 'Oh, shit!' I get fear, then anger - 'Oh, shit!' And it's directed to you," he told me, though I was finding it hard to believe the sensations he was describing. It was as though he had slipped into Lona's body on the day of the accident and had soared with her to her death. I pictured Lona coming out of the plane, falling toward the ground with the other jumpers, maneuvering into a formation, then breaking and tracking away from the others. I could see her alone in the air, her body spread like a butterfly's wings as she glided against a bright blue backdrop. But then she had collided with Kelleher, and it had ended.

I imagined her rage when she realized that she'd miscalculated, had come too close to him, and her abysmal fear when she understood that there was no saving her, no way to remedy the error. She was dying even before she struck the ground, her life quickly being extinguished by fear.

"Oh, shit!" It was a characteristic reaction to situations of the sort. In several cases, black box recorders aboard jet planes have recorded pilots' final words before their craft have plunged to the earth, and "Oh, shit!" is often all that they can think of to say. It is a bit common and far from profound, but it capsulizes the feelings that must go through the mind when you realize that death is coming and there are no detours between it and you. I'd never thought about the reality of Lona's death; for me, it had been a newspaper story, an account of something that had happened to someone else, but now I found myself confronting what had really happened.

I saw my first wife falling through the air, her body as vulnerable as that of a caterpillar about to be squashed beneath someone's foot, toward a fate from which there was no recall. I saw her face contort with the pressure of the air whipping by, felt the pain of loss well up in her eyes. I didn't like the picture, but it seemed an accurate one. I wanted to turn away from it, to turn it off, but found I could not do so. My eyes were glued to the picture as though I'd lost control of them. I had to see how the film turned out, even though I hated the picture itself.

"I really don't want to go into it too much further," the young man was saying, "but if you want, I'll talk to you later about it."

I couldn't bring myself to respond. I shook my head in the dark, wanting to tell him how moved I had been by his message, but unable to force the words up my throat. I sat silently, oblivious to the rest of the seance, not caring whether Mahatma Gandhi himself appeared in his dhoti for all to see.

I sorted through my feelings, tried to separate the real and unreal, the factual from the purely emotional. Making this distinction was becoming increasingly difficult. Like the two halves of a face, they blended into each other, took something from their counterpart that was impossible to subtract. I wanted to remain cold and calculating, to be viciously critical, but something inside me was responding to this insanity, was beginning to gravitate toward it like a plant toward the sun or, perhaps more appropriately, like a moth toward the flame.

I had no desire to be consumed by the heat of my search for Lona's soul, but at the same time couldn't rule out the possibility that it was the sun I was aspiring to and not an open fire. I intended to remain skeptical of the evidence I was presented with, but proof seemed to be accumulating. I had been told many details about Lona. Many of them were true. One or two hits I could dismiss as blind luck or

intelligent guessing, but dozens were harder to explain away. And now this person to whom I'd never spoken in my life, someone who knew nothing at all about me, had described Lona's death - a most unusual death - in a chillingly accurate way.

After the seance ended, I took the young man aside. His name was Mark, but in keeping with the accepted protocol, I didn't ask his last name. I questioned him further about his experience. It was late June, but the evening was quite cold. We stood outside the stuffy, smoke-filled room in which the other members of the group were still talking and shook with the chill of the night as we spoke. I asked him to describe what he had seen, heard, and felt in as much detail as he could. He was happy to oblige, apparently feeling that he was helping me in some unexplained way by doing so. Only my sense of rectitude prevented me from offering to pay him for the information - that was how anxious I was for it.

"Originally I thought a helicopter," he told me, his breath a white fog in the dark air. "But then I said, 'No.' I felt myself circling and jumping, okay. When I'm coming down, I feel okay, but I see buildings in the distance. I tried to get a time. I remember crispy, light clouds. I felt originally fall, maybe spring. I saw the city, but I felt like I could see a hilly area or mountains. And I was falling and falling, and all of a sudden becoming panicky.

"I was in a plane, a very light plane. I felt the air was very crispy ... you know, you get that really crispy blue air. I couldn't tell whether it was morning or night or evening. But the thing that impressed me was that it was very blue - a beautiful blue sky. I remember myself falling and looking down and seeing ... looking down and seeing an area, I'd interpret it as a city, being able to see high buildings. I felt that I was away from a city, but I could see it in the distance.

"Okay, I remember spinning and all of a sudden getting a panicky feeling - for some reason panicky, and reaching for something, okay."

Lona's ripcord, I thought!

"The next thing, 'Ahhh, shit!' I felt, 'Ahhh, shit!' and I'm not the sort of person to pick up something like that. And then I remember I'm getting dizzy, and that was it. And I had to tell you about that."

My first inclination was to tell Mark that he'd described the death of my first wife in an amazingly accurate fashion, and to ask him to work with me on my book, but journalistic suspicions stopped me from doing so. Instead I resorted to the first defense of the interviewer and began to pepper him with questions.

"What did you see on the ground when you looked down?" I asked.

"You know, it's funny," he said, "when I originally first saw it, I saw myself not being in this particular area, like here, I felt myself being in a flat area, flat ground. The first time I saw her, I saw her with the grass, and then it broke away, and I saw mostly dirt and I saw it very, very dry. That's all I remember seeing."

This was the first time Mark had mentioned a woman in connection with this strange impression of his, but I'd been writing Lona into the script all along.

I noted that as he talked about his experience, his impressions seemed to become more and more detailed, as though he were remembering items that at first he hadn't thought were important and therefore hadn't mentioned. I pressed him further, hoping that other factual material might come out during the stream-of-consciousness exercise.

"I felt everything was okay, and it was a really good feeling, a crispy feeling. The air felt great and it was really clear, and I felt there was no wind or anything wrong. It just felt like everything should be perfect; that was my interpretation. And looking over here and seeing the mountains, and feeling very free, and all of a sudden this panicky situation. And I felt her getting actually mad and saying 'Ahhh, shit!' and having an uncontrollable frustration along with it."

"Did you get any idea of the appearance of this person?" I asked.

"No, I honestly didn't," he said.

"What's it like when you see these things?" I asked, wanting to understand the method as well as the results. I could see for myself what he'd produced, but had no idea how he'd gleaned the information for me.

"I see them in my head," he told me. "You ever dream? Okay ... I used to see cartoons when I was a kid all the time - that's what I see. I don't see it out there in front of me, in the real world, like Lillian and some of the others do; I see it inside my head. I actually sit there and I see it, and feel it... I see it more than feel it. I'd have to interpret it as imagination, which is why, a lot of times, I don't say anything about it."

I was reassured to hear that even this warlock, this person who seemed able to harness unnatural forces, was skeptical of what went on inside him. He was a salesman for an electrical equipment company, it developed, and his scientific bent had not been completely compromised by the nonscientific experiences he'd had in his lessons with Lillian. He remained a doubter, and I credited his terrifying tale the more for his reluctance to admit that it was more than imagination.

If the cause was imagination, though, it was imagination in a form that I'd never encountered before.

"Were you aware of anyone else's presence?" I asked him, desperately trying to wring every possible detail from his subconscious.

"I felt two people," he remarked without hesitation, as though the detail was lying in front of him all along but he hadn't thought to pick it up. "I felt, I originally felt as though I were the pilot. Then I felt myself iumping, falling, but at the same time I saw myself with headphones on and glasses, and looked down and felt something was wrong, and it made no sense to me."

"Now I remember seeing headphones or something on his head - I took it as a man. And I remember

seeing glasses - I don't know if they were sunglasses or regular glasses - and looking, you know a panicky situation, looking down, but then ... I snap into falling again. I hate to leave you there," Mark apologized, "but that's all I have."

I considered whether an apology had ever been less appropriate. Mark had provided the first detailed account of Lona's death that I'd yet encountered. Lillian and the other mediums had successfully described fragments of the fall, alluding to ropes and some of the injuries that Lona had suffered, but here was someone who had seen her fall to the ground, had described the accident as fully "as was possible, given the limited information available. I had no idea whether it had happened exactly as he said, but it certainly didn't contradict anything that I knew about the tragedy. I'd have to know more about it in order to render a final verdict on his account, but it seemed accurate in every detail.

The plane involved was a light plane. It always circled over the target before the jumpers went out the door. The landing zone was a dry, dusty circle of ground surrounded by grassy fields. The jump center was located in South Jersey, which was as flat as a farmer's trailing black shadow. I knew that one could see some small rises of land nearby, and that when the skies were clear, Philadelphia was visible in the distance. I'd passed over the spot numerous times when I was flying into Philadelphia International Airport, and each time I saw the large radar dome located in Mount Holly, I thought of Lona's house, which was just a short distance away from both the dome and jump center. Then the city of Philadelphia would rear up in front of my eyes, a city of tall buildings surrounded by flat suburbs.

It was extraordinary that Mark had been able to pick up so much during the seance. I didn't know whether Kelleher was the man that he had mentioned or whether the weather had been as described, but I couldn't rule them out as reasonable possibilities. In order to judge those details better, I'd have to look at the accident reports and talk with the police who'd actually visited the scene and who had seen Lona and Kelleher lying on the ground, surrounded by their crumpled parachutes. I didn't look forward to that, but knew that probably it was inevitable. It was the only way I'd ever know whether Mark's description was fact or fantasy.

I felt that it was important to separate the two, even though the weight of the material favored the former.

As I drove home, I wondered how much of this I should tell Julie. She had a difficult time dealing with sore throats and skinned knees, let alone the sort of injuries I'd been forced to consider tonight. I doubted that she'd be particularly interested in hearing Lona's alleged final words or in hearing Mark's rendition of the accident itself. She wasn't interested in hearing me reminisce about Lona, and I suspected that she wouldn't exactly welcome the opportunity to hear about her death from the lips of a stranger, let alone from me.

I didn't really have to worry, though. When I arrived home, I found Julie in a state of nervous exhaustion. She was waiting for me in the living room, curled up on the sofa as though the room were filled with rats and she was wailing for me to drive them away so that she could step onto the floor again. I'd never seen her look so panic-stricken and couldn't imagine what had happened. My first thought was that something was wrong with the children, but then I knew that wasn't so. If either one

of them was sick, Julie would have been caring for them, not sitting here suffering silently.

"What's wrong? What's happened?" I asked her, and she didn't wait to be coaxed into telling her tale. I sat beside her, rubbing her hands between mine, trying to restore some calm to her trembling body. I waited until I sensed that her terror had subsided, then reached over and turned the tape recorder on. I thought her story was worth preserving.

"I went to bed at eleven fifteen," she said. "At around eleven thirty, I was awakened by a very loud noise, which sounded like a gunshot. I heard a lot of noises in the house, a lot of creaking - house noises."

"Normal noises?" I interrupted.

"But there were a lot of them," she explained, "more than the usual settling and creaking. Then I thought I heard something out back. I thought that I heard someone approaching the house."

I asked what she meant, finding it hard to imagine what someone walking toward the house sounded like.

"A prowler, or something like that," Julie went on, more eager to let it all spill out than draw diagrams for me. "I got a knitting needle and got up. I came out here, and I sat here reading" - I pictured her, book in one hand, knitting needle in the other, ready to defend her home against all intruders - "and I heard what sounded like typing noises coming from the basement. I rationalized the house noises as the

louvers being open in the attic upstairs and wind blowing through, but I really had a hard time rationalizing the typing noises," she said. "Did you go down to the basement?" I asked, finding it difficult to imagine Julie walking into any questionable situation without me or a shotgun at her side.

"No, I didn't go down to the basement." -

I went downstairs to my office to check it out. Nothing was out of place or making strange noises, and I stood there, wondering what could have possibly produced a noise that sounded like a typewriter. There wasn't any sensible explanation. I went back to Julie's side, and she resumed her tale of night-time terror. I asked if she knew whether the sound that had awakened her was real or not, something she had dreamed or something outside the house.

"Outside the house," she replied, without thinking the matter over, so convinced by the fact that she needed no reconsideration. "It was a crack." She slapped her hands together, mimicking the sound, and I thought of Lillian's hand cracking down on her kitchen tabletop. "It sounded very much like a shotgun blast, very close to the house, and at that point I thought, 'Well, maybe somebody's hunting' - until realized the hour."

There were some woods behind our home which "occasionally attracted hunters, but rarely at eleven o'clock at night.

"Could it have been a kid with a firecracker?" I asked, playing devil's advocate to her conviction that something unnatural, out of the ordinary, had happened.

"No, it wasn't a firecracker," she said, but gave the idea some thought. "I don't think it was a firecracker. There's a difference between a firecracker and a gun. This sounded like a gun."

"How long did the typing continue?" I kept trying to find a way to explain the incident, to brush it aside and restore Julie's peace of mind, but each attempt seemed more futile than the one preceding. I hoped that some bit of information would come along that would suddenly make the whole thing clear, so that we could go to bed.

"It was on and off for about half an hour."

So much for a momentary hallucination, I thought.

"And it sounded like it was coming from ..."

"The basement," Julie concluded. "First I thought it might be the hot-water heater, but that's on the other side of the basement. This was coming from the side your office is on."

"Was it windy outside?" I asked, clutching at straws, thinking that some branches might have been brushing against the house; the only problem was that a few small shrubs were the only plants close enough to touch the shingles.

"No, no windier than when you walked in."

That, I thought, was the other problem with the tree-branch theory.

"I just had a very unsettled feeling about the house," Julie went on, not waiting for my prompting, "particularly about the dining-room area and the basement."

"At one point, Joanne got up for a moment and crashed into the wall as she was getting back into bed, and I thought, Thank God, a normal noise. I was just very anxious for you to get home."

We talked for a few more minutes, but Julie's feeling of impending doom had dissipated, and a short while later we went to bed. She cuddled particularly close to me, though, as if she was attempting to drive the unexplained away with a dose of meaty warmth from my body.

It had been a disturbing evening, for Julie, as well as for myself. I lay in the dark, Julie welded to my back like a catcher's mitt cradling the ball, and wondered what was going on. I'd become inured to the dreams and lights, only to have more and more compelling situations come my way. Now Julie was becoming involved in self-questioning, in debating whether the impressions her senses were conveying to her were rooted in her own imagination or in reality. It seemed that our life together was

taking on a new, unlikely dimension, an aspect that had nothing to do with who we were or how we felt about each other, but, like an accident, was imposing itself on our lives whether we liked it or not.

It wasn't the sort of change I'd hoped for in our relationship, but it was better than nothing. Stagnation seemed the least desirable way in which to expire. Now we had a chance to change in unpredictable ways; we were being forced into a reappraisal of our limited view of life and seemed destined to come away with at least a new insight or two. I wanted to accelerate the process, to be done with it as much as I wanted to explore it, but suspected that this research was gradually being taken out of my hands.



## Chapter Nine

A person has to be a bit of a manic-depressive to seek out the pain that these experiences seemed to bring to me and my family. I had no overt desire to harm them, and couldn't discount the possibility that I was flirting with something that was better left untouched. I needed to research a book about as much as I needed to sell life insurance; I had more than enough work with my outstanding magazine assignments and the book proposal that I was submitting to publishers. Another book really wasn't a consummation devoutly to be wished at the moment. I'd be better off, I knew, confining my energies to a few projects than spreading myself so thin.

I began to think I was hooked, though, when I found myself driving back to Lillian's the very next day. The séance had been more than enough for me to handle, but I was heading back for more. One of the reasons was that despite my growing familiarity with Lillian's talents I still knew nothing about her. I figured that she was going to play an important part in whatever I wrote, so I felt obliged to take the time to ask her a few questions about herself.

I noticed the cars piled up in the driveway, as I did each time I arrived; Lillian's husband, Bill, was obviously still striving to repair them. I walked inside, now comfortable with the freeform atmosphere of her home. People wandered in and out as though they owned the place, but I still didn't know who half of them were.

Lillian was in the kitchen as usual, fixing yet another in a lifetime of cups of coffee, and seemed pleased to see me. She was a unique woman, I thought; she piled half a dozen occupations into one rather unimpressive body. She sat down across from me at the kitchen table, as she had gotten into the habit of doing, and stared at me, as though she was as puzzled by me as I was by her. I'd never stopped to think that the idea of writing, of making some meaning out of this madness, might seem as strange and improbable to her as her pastimes were to me. She waited for me to plug in my tape recorder, sipping her coffee and taking drags on her cigarette. I told her that I wanted to find out what she experienced during a reading. I settled back into my chair as Lillian began to unreel the story of her life.

She had been born in Boston and had attended parochial schools. Her father was an officer of a telephone-company union, and her mother had died when Lillian was rather young. She spoke of her mother with a surprising lack of emotion, as though she was describing a great-aunt, but, I realized, a mother could be a stranger as well as anyone else.

Lillian explained that she'd first realized she was different from other children when, at the age of seven, she had seen a group of people dressed in old-fashioned clothing crying behind the altar of a Catholic church in Dorchester, where she attended school. The crowd was accompanied by several priests, who were dressed in black. She asked a priest whom she knew why the people were crying, what had happened to upset them so, but the priest didn't see what she saw. As far as he was concerned, the church was empty except for himself and this small child. He asked her what the priests looked like, and when she described them, a frightened look crossed his face. They went to the rectory, and flipping through the pages of an old photograph album, the priest asked Lillian if she recognized any of the clerics as being the priests she'd just seen in the church. She picked out several.

The priests in question had been dead for many years, but when alive had officiated at special anniversary masses for flu epidemic victims.

The incident was soon forgotten, but Lillian continued to see individuals who seemed invisible to everyone else. It wasn't until much later that she realized what she was doing, and, undeterred by her father's disapproval, began to use her abilities. She attended Emmanuel College, married, operated a nursery school for several years, but found her mediumship and family more important than a career. She had three daughters, but over the years had also raised a large litter of foster children. The interesting characters who infested her house like fleas included her husband's brother-in-law and two retired veterans who boarded there. Hers was not your normal nuclear family, but it seemed to suit her perfectly. There was a bit of the ragpicker in Lillian, but she collected strays, people who might seem out of place elsewhere, and made them an integral part of her museum of curiosities.

I waited while she lit up yet another Herbert Tareyton and then asked what it was like when she was reading. She explained that she saw spirits, saw the form that they had had when they were alive, as clearly as she saw me. They existed in space in the same way as I did, and when they stepped in front of a chair, obscured it from view. As far as Lillian was concerned, they were as visible as the people I knew. She saw them with her naked eye, not with her mind or inner eye.

The difference was that, unlike your normal guest, they were inconstant. They might show Lillian Just one portion of their body, a scarred hand, for instance, which the person sitting for the reading would recognize; they might indicate their identity by specifying a physical-symptom, for example, a cough; at times, they seemed quite solid, but at other times would become transparent. It was anybody's guess exactly what they would do when they appeared. I didn't want to pry into their sex lives, but asked Lillian if they ever felt the need for sexual identification badges. She said that they did, but didn't go into the details. I thought that I was in for a little libidinous thrill, but she went on to talk about her mediumship. She also heard the spirits speak to her, she explained, but not in the same "external" way as she saw them; the voice seemed to sound within her ears.

I recalled the times when I'd heard Lona's voice, as well as the grim, computer like voice that had spouted poetry about "God's gift to you through man." Perhaps Lillian and I had something more in common than a book, after all.

At times, Lillian indicated, she "felt" sensations that the spirit had experienced while alive-Lona's trauma, for instance - or might smell or taste things connected with the spirit in one way or another - she might, for example, smell lemons if a spirit had been noted for a particularly lemony cologne. It was a grab bag of approaches to the same basic goal, which was to convince the people sitting for readings that their beloved one, though departed, remained very much alive and wished to help them improve their own spiritual condition.

One thing that had become apparent, though, was that they didn't prove their existence by whipping out a driver's license or rattling off the details of their life. There seemed always to be an element of faith involved in the transaction. They revealed enough about themselves to suggest strongly that they were still around, but not so much that the most adamant of skeptics would believe. The evidence might be very persuasive, but life after death always stopped short of becoming a certainty "beyond a

reasonable doubt." One was left holding the existential bag. Others might suggest a conclusion, but the decision was left up to each individual.

Pressed for indisputable facts, spirits tended to grow cantankerous, retreating into their spiritual shells and refusing to cooperate at all. Left to their own devices, however, Lillian explained, they often came out with information that was nearly foolproof.

I'd seen it happen, I thought. Lillian had told me things about Lona that were difficult to dismiss. Her student Mark had provided an equally adept performance. But still, I wondered whether there was an explanation short of spirits that would fit the bill. I mentioned the possibility to Lillian, wondering whether ESP or some other ability might be the real source of her intelligence about the dead relatives of living people.

She seemed shocked by the idea, as though I'd suggested that her motives were suspect, but answered the question as best she could under the circumstances. She said that she'd never felt that she was obtaining information from the mind of the person she read for, but couldn't be absolutely certain that something like that didn't occasionally happen; but since she could see and hear and communicate with spirits, she tended to believe that they were what they represented themselves to be and not something else.

"I trust them implicitly," she told me. "I've never had any reason to doubt them."

I wished silently that I could say as much about Lillian, but I couldn't. She'd done things that no computer could do - IBM's had a hard enough time predicting the weather, but Lillian seemed able to describe people from my past and events in my future with equal ease. As though to illustrate the point, she suddenly asked if anyone in my family would be celebrating a birthday or anniversary during the coming month.

Immediately I thought of Joanne, whose birthday was the very next day; I told her that she was correct. She then proceeded to describe a gift I would wind up giving this person, a necklace or a bracelet with a heart on it. I chalked this up as another error. Julie had ordered a bracelet for Joanne, which in itself was an interesting coincidence, but it was a monogram bracelet; it had her initials on it, not a heart.

I was somewhat shocked the following day when Julie went to pick up the bracelet. The jeweler hadn't made it, and Julie was forced to pick a bracelet from those in stock. She came home with a gold bracelet bearing a heart.

I'd told her nothing about Lillian's prediction. I thanked Lillian for all her help and headed home, hoping to leave all the paranormal problems behind for a while, but found them waiting in an unexpected guise at my front door. It was late when I finally pulled into the driveway, and Joanne, unable to restrain her pleasure at seeing me, rushed out in her nightgown to greet me. I was delighted by her joy and didn't give the nightgown a second thought. It was warm, and no cars were passing by at the moment. But Julie was horrified that Joanne, who was quickly blossoming into a young woman, had gone outside in something as flimsy as a nightgown.

I might have held my tongue in ordinary circumstances, but after the emotional blitz of the past few days I had little patience left. I told Julie I thought she was overreacting, and then she showed me what overreacting was all about.

It was like detonating a land mine - an awful lot happened, but if asked, one would have been hard pressed to describe it in detail. There was an explosion of hitherto stifled resentment and anger, the miasmatic result of all the tense little moments we'd shared during the preceding months. As when a doctor lances a boil, all the pus that had been building up within us over an extended period of time came out in one depressing rush. I felt as though I'd been struck in the chest with a two-by-four. And no matter how desperately I tried to backtrack, to mitigate what I'd said, the argument went on, grinding the earth like a locomotive running away down a hill.

Finally I heard Julie say, "You're in love with the ghost of your ex-wife. That's the only person you care about!"

Her words shot through me; I couldn't believe that I was hearing this. How dare she! Julie may have had some problems when Lona was alive: I'd never spent a wedding anniversary with Julie because each year I'd wound up visiting the girls when our anniversary fell. This was immaterial to me, a matter of small significance, but it was a mortal blow to her. I regretted it when she finally mentioned it to me, but the damage had already been done.

But now, now that Lona was dead, it seemed impossible that Julie was jealous. I was writing a book about paranormal phenomena, not trying to get fixed up with a ghost. There was an element of emotion involved, I told myself then, a faint feeling of affection for Lona, which lingered though Lona herself didn't, but I couldn't believe that it had gotten to Julie. Yet it had.

"Why don't you go sleep with your ghost!" she shouted, and I gasped with astonishment. Even if I had wanted to sleep with someone else, I thought, it would most certainly not be a ghost; I preferred something a bit more real, a bit warmer, and more pliable, for that.

Fortunately the pressure eased, and, surprisingly, Joanne's thirteenth birthday went very well. She invited a number of her friends, and we picnicked and played games in the backyard. I was amazed to find myself feeling great at the end of the day - it was one of my most remarkable recoveries. The following week was more of the same, a period of time in which it seemed that I was recuperating from my sojourn with the psychic. I was caught up with my plans for the book about the mother and son, having heard that a particular publisher had offered a handsome price for it. Our agents were now arranging for an auction to be held, a process that would certainly produce an even heftier advance. It was the first time I'd been involved in such a process, and the excitement rubbed off on me despite my best intentions to remain levelheaded.

I'd gotten used to the ups and downs of a career in journalism - certain stories didn't pan out, certain magazines changed their minds - and postponed the celebration until the day after the celebration took place. It was simply a matter of not counting one's cash before it was advanced.

The book, which also required frequent visits to the two prisons where our stars were staying, took up most of my time, and what time I had left was absorbed by chores - house, garden, and lawn. I had little time for myself, but occasionally managed to sneak off to the -Glades to do a bit of fishing. This was the first summer that I'd done any fishing, and although I'd long disliked the sport, I found it appealing once I actually tried it; it was relaxing, and gave me a chance to snort up the salt sea air, as well as to refine a beautiful tan. Unfortunately it was less productive when it came to fish. There had been only one really good day for fishing since I'd purchased my rod and reel.

On that morning, a friend had showed up on my doorstep with a twenty-pound bluefish hanging from his hand as though he'd caught it by using his fingers for bait. A feeding frenzy was taking place in the Glades, and George had stumbled across it. I grabbed my gear, and we ran back to the small cove from which he'd just come. I could barely believe my eyes - it was a fisherman's dream taking place in the flesh. The water by the rocks was thick with game fish, a wall of moving silver creatures, which had been herded into shore by a pack of blues.

Beyond them, in the deeper water, one could see the huge sleek bodies of the blues sweeping along beneath the water, like miniature sharks closing in for the kill. They shot into the frenzy of game fish, then ricocheted out like artillery shells taking chunks out of a living wall. The surface of the water was livid with the torn, bleeding bodies of fish they'd torn in half. George and I lost no time in getting our lures into the water, and for the next two hours we pulled in a blue with virtually every cast. Eventually the tide ran out, forcing the fish back into deeper water, but not before we'd caught seventeen of them, a total of more than two hundred pounds of fish.

This had been our first, and our last, moment of fishing glory; since then we'd had to be satisfied with flounder, pollock, and an occasional perch. The blues and the striped bass stayed away from the Glades as though they were contaminated. Elsewhere, fishermen were pulling in the big game fish, but George and I contented ourselves with our less impressive catches.

Having a week in which to forget my psychic misadventures did me a world of good. I felt happy with the pending book project, with my family, and with my mundane chores and entertainments. Mine was a simple life, but a rewarding one. I even began to forget the blowup with Julie, feeling that it was simply a necessary catharsis that every marriage required once in a while, not unlike changing the old oil in one's automobile. It was unfortunate that the oil ever got dirty, but dirty oil didn't mean that you had to get rid of the car.

The week's retreat from the paranormal affected even my dreams. They reverted to their normal forms, replete with living people and perfectly reasonable situations. They didn't slip to the predictable banality of *Eight Is Enough*, but they were somewhere in the regions of normalcy. I thought that the search for Lona had probably come to an unexpected, but in many ways welcome, end. Like other interests, it had flared, burned brightly for a while, and now it had died. I spent no time grieving. I had a book that was a given, one that dealt with facts, not fictions, and would require all of my attention. I didn't need another one, particularly one that was so disruptive of my life and the life of my wife. I said a silent prayer of thanks for my deliverance from the forces of ignorance and superstition.

The next night, I dreamed a dream that seemed to say it all. I went looking for Lona in the dream and found nothing, an empty vacuum; I languished in space, weeping over my failure.

"I wanted to find Lona," I cried, "to be with her again, but she isn't here. She's gone, she's really dead."

It was now more than three years since Lona's death, but finally I'd shaken the habit of her. It had been a beautiful but addictive relationship, but now, at long last, I'd shaken my ex-wife from my back. It was Julie who mattered now, Julie alone, our life with each other and with our children. I couldn't ask for anything more.

Julie and I might still have problems that needed to be resolved, but Lona was no longer one of them. She was past history, as ancient and esteemed, perhaps, as a piece of Byzantine pottery, but equally dead.

## Chapter Ten

I was lying in bed several days later when I realized that nothing out of the ordinary had happened to me in nearly a week. Several times I'd tried to slip into an altered state of consciousness, making my mind an empty panorama of sea, a smooth ocean devoid of ships or clouds or gulls, a perfectly flat and stark surface that stirred no thoughts, but I'd found it difficult to do so. The more I tried to empty my mind of thought, the more thoughts infiltrated it, as though the moment I relaxed, thoughts flooded through a breach in my mindlessness.

I thought that I was beyond the psychic pale once more, out of touch with whatever I'd stumbled upon earlier, but I didn't know what was really happening. I felt safe, secure from the storm of the supernatural, but in fact this was just the lull before yet another nor'easter from the nether regions of my inner universe.

Secretly I wanted the world of the psychic to continue intruding upon my life. I'd found the experience thrilling as well as chilling, but couldn't stand the mindlessness of it all. Yet I seemed to feel that it wasn't meant to be, that I wasn't among the group of Lillian, Irene, Nelda, and Mary - the people who seemed able to make the connection that thus far had eluded me. I welcomed the rest from the travails of the night-time tempests and decided that the best thing for me was an ordinary life of reporting and raising a family.

I had no need for extraneous sources of kicks, whether in this world or some other. I'd never been into drugs or liquor - I'd never even had a single snort of coke, though some magazine offices seemed to stock good supplies of it - since I felt that all the joy of life was intense enough already. I didn't have to enhance it any more than I had to enhance sex, and if it got any better, I'd have to wear a crash helmet or risk losing my head. I know that other people feel differently, but I couldn't speak for them; I could only speak for myself.

The problem of the supernatural was similar - I always wound up with evidence that spoke only to me. I found some of it very persuasive, nearly proof, but for someone else, doubts would always remain: Was I telling the truth, was I reporting what I'd seen accurately, did I really have these experiences, were there other explanations for what had happened, was I a certified loony? How could I prove to someone else that what was essentially a personal search, a search into my own consciousness, had yielded real information about a person who was dead? It was another Buddhist koan: How does one make the personal impersonal? And the answer is that one does not. One can only tell as accurately as possible what one has observed and let the reader make his own decision, draw Ms own conclusion.

The reader might demand that I take a lie-detector test, but I didn't think that would prove anything, either. Perhaps I was a psychotic liar, perhaps I was insane, perhaps the machine had no device for measuring a pathology as intense as mine. Perhaps I'd never told the truth about anything; perhaps I'd only reported on delusions.

To be in danger of losing credibility was the worst possible spot for a reporter. I couldn't imagine what it would be like to be a journalist whom no one believed. It would be like a hooker without looks

or a lawyer without books or a judge without a gavel. I'd never considered the possibility that my credibility might be in danger. I'd written enough controversial and critical magazine pieces, had spent enough time going over manuscripts with lawyers, to know that my word generally reflected reality rather well. I had successfully defended my conclusions in several lawsuits. I certainly had no inkling when I began looking into the matter of Lona's existence that my investigations would jeopardize the luxury of having other people believe me.

Sometimes, when the girls would begin to argue with me about something they'd said, I found myself telling them, "Look, I'm a reporter. I pay very close attention to what people say. That's my business, and I'm quite good at it. Don't tell me what you said, I remember what you said - exactly." This was unfair to the kids, perhaps, but these abilities were an ingrained portion of myself, and I was proud of them. I was the witness, the person who stood in the corner of a crowded room with a notepad in his hand, silently recording the event for posterity.

Yet I wondered if I had started to place that fine possession in jeopardy, and would discover that it wasn't worth the price. Fortunately, I had seemed destined to have the discovery made for me. It had become apparent to me only after the phenomena no longer seemed interested in performing for me anyway.

I wasn't thinking, as I fell asleep, that I was in for yet another episode of unexplained behavior on the part of my subconscious, but it turned out that I was.

No sooner had I slipped into sleep than the dreams began to flash across the screen of my mind like a series of coming attractions at the movies. I saw scenes involving Dolly Parton, as well as Cheryl, one of Julie's best friends, and took trips to England as well as El Paso. I didn't realize it then, but I was also setting the stage for the main event. I was becoming more and more conscious of my dreams, slowly waking to the reality of them. They were only dreams, but I was slowly becoming aware of their details, taking in more and more of the action they contained. I was waking up inside my head, seeing scenes that existed nowhere but there and which were taking on more and more reality for me. They were the reprise before the main show, the appetizer for the dinner, a warming up of my attention for what was destined to follow.

I thought it was Cartoon Matinee on a snowy Saturday afternoon, but I didn't know what was in store for me.

Suddenly, within my elaborate dream, I found myself lying in a bed in a small, closed room. I was lying on my stomach and seemed to be staring at the wall closest to the head of the bed. The wall was covered with dark-gray wallpaper, the gray so perfectly even that it seemed something other than real, too neat to be normal. I glanced up the length of the wall, looking for some small imperfection, some indication that this was a real-life episode and not just another dream.

About a foot above my head, I saw a small bubble in the paper, just the sort of thing I'd been looking for. It looked as though there was a small hole in the wall at that point and air was seeping in through it. The air had gradually lifted the paper away from the wall, forming a small air pocket beneath it.



I stared at the bubble, trying to decipher its form more clearly, trying to make out the exact nature of its contours and cause, but thought that the bubble was slowly changing. It seemed to be growing larger, taking on a new and somehow different shape. I watched, fascinated, as it underwent amazing transformations, blowing into a variety of forms that shifted constantly, merging from one shape into the next. It was as though the wallpaper was wet and cold air was seeping in through a crack behind it. As the breeze wafted in through the plaster behind, the wet bubble underwent its interesting contortions, inflating and then deflating, growing larger, then smaller.

I continued to watch, and all of a sudden saw a clear design beneath the bubble. There were small ridges outlining the bubble's skin, little bumps along the periphery. At first, the design made no sense to me, but suddenly a light bulb flicked on inside my head. I thought of the fine markings on the outer edge of a woman's nipple. I wanted to study the design more closely, but even as I watched, it seemed to be changing more. The bubble was growing larger, its shape continuing to define itself. I backed away from the wall a bit so that I could see better what was happening. The bubble swelled, seemed searching for some form in which it could settle permanently. I watched with interest, wondering what it would resemble when the transformations stopped. I intended to memorize this strange phenomenon, to commit it to my conscious as well as my subconscious mind, but had no idea that I was asleep. I was trying to latch onto the experience so that I could take it back to the waking state, though I didn't even know that I was dreaming.

Soon I saw where the shape was heading; it had taken on the firm contours of a young woman's breast. I could scarcely believe my eyes, let alone my mind's interpretation of what I saw. It was Lona's breast, I suddenly realized. I had no doubts about it. And it was strange that I didn't - a breast is not exactly the most recognizable part of a person's body; it has no features, no expression, no clues to identity as a face does, but I was certain that it was Lona's breast and no one else's.

I knew it in an unexplainable way, just as I knew my name and how to compose a letter to an editor. The knowledge had nothing to do with, my senses, but had something to do with the inside of me. The information was coming from the inside rather than from the outside. I'd noticed the same sort of thing in other dreams. I'd suddenly sense in a very real way that someone was nearby, though I could not see or hear or, as far as I knew, smell him, as when a person walks into a room beyond your field of vision, and you know that someone is present, even though you hadn't heard or seen a thing to suggest that someone is present.

A skeptic would say that you've noticed a change in air pressure or some other subtle clue to his presence, but my dream-impressions seemed to relate to something more than subconscious indications. Maybe the phenomenon was akin to ESP, but I couldn't imagine ESP any more easily than I could imagine that I was actually seeing Lona's breast. It wasn't the sort of thing one expects to sneak up on one's subconscious during a dream.

I felt that something was happening over which I had no control, or which was beyond my understanding, at the very least. I watched with wide-eyed wonder as the breast grew away from the wall, seemed to press forward, bringing other portions of the wallpaper with it. Since Lona's death, I'd never thought about making love to her again; such an idea was decadent, something that a pervert might entertain, and an idea that repelled me. I felt that Lona was living only insofar as my memories

of her were memories of her alive.

I'd thought about our past lovemaking, our tremendous groping and grunting beneath the sheets of our bed, but had never considered the idea of making love to Lona now; that was sacrilege, a profaning of the dead. But now the thought of making love to Lona suddenly crossed my mind as though the possibility once more existed. I was dumbfounded by the notion, as I was by the form emerging before my eyes.

The bubble had now assumed the features of a human body; it had formed arms, a torso, the beginnings of thighs, the shape of a head, and the bare outlines of facial features. I watched in amazed disbelief as Lona's face slowly took form beneath the wet, gray shroud. Suddenly it occurred to me that this paper was not wallpaper on a wall but rather a shroud stretched over Lona's body. As the thought passed through my mind, Lona began to rise up beneath the shroud, as though she was waking up from a long night's sleep and had found herself surrounded by a sheet. She started to strain up, betiding at the waist, against the constriction of her covers. It was a miracle, I thought. Lona was dead, not sleeping; she had been killed in a parachuting accident, not fallen asleep beneath the sheet of this unusual bed.

Lona continued to evolve behind the gray screen that separated the two of us from each other. Her face became more clearly defined, eventually assuming all the detail it had known in life. I had never noticed the exquisite articulation of detail I was seeing now; I was able to make out individual hairs in her eyebrows, as though I was viewing them through a magnifying glass, even though the gray shroud was between us. I glanced down at the rest of her body and saw her navel winking at me through the veil, saw the shape of her loins, and suddenly realized that I was now straddling her body.

I seemed to be kneeling on a bed on which she was lying, and was now waiting for her to waken to me - a Prince Not-so-charming waiting for his Sleeping Beauty to rise and join him in a passionate embrace. I reached for her, intending to take her in my arms, and as I did, noticed the smile on her face. It was her soft, sensual smile, the corners of her mouth curling up at serpentine angles to give her the look of a seductress; it was a smile that I'd nearly forgotten.

But as I started to take her in my arms, the lips began to move.

"I am dead now," she said, unexpectedly tossing me for a tumbling loop through inner space, "and you'll never be able to touch me again."

Immediately I found myself objecting to her newest and most profound rejection.

"Not yet," I offered, "or not now, but not forever. I have to hold you in my arms once more. I can't let you go without touching you again, telling you with my arms how much I've loved you."

I didn't wait for her reply, but reached out and took her, unresisting, into my arms, cradling her against my body as a father might comfort a forlorn child, informing her with warmth and physical pressure that there was safety in a dangerous world. I checked my own sensations, suddenly aware of the fact that I was not awake. I felt her torso melting against mine, felt the solid form of her shoulders and

back against my fingertips. I was still aware of the color of the sheet and had heard her voice. The only sense that didn't seem to be operative was the sense of smell.

I noted that Lona's voice had at first seemed impersonal, as though it might have been anyone's, but that it slipped into her exact sound before she'd finished her sentence. I had no more doubts that it was her voice than I had that it was her beneath this covering.

"But I still love you," she said, seeming a bit surprised by the discovery. "I guess I'll love you for the rest of my life."

I loved the sentiment, but again felt obliged to qualify, to refine the facts a bit further. "No, not for the rest of your life," I told her, thinking of her tragic death. "We'll love each other until the last atoms of the universe decay." This sounded like a lyric from a maudlin love song, and I mentally apologized for its corniness. I knew that my qualifications were unnecessary, that Lona was talking about an eternal sort of love, not a love confined to a particular stretch of time, but the journalist in me never let go. I wanted to set the facts straight.

I must have been impossible for Lona to live with, I suddenly realized.

I leaned forward in order to embrace Lona more closely, but as I did so, she suddenly complained. She said that her stomach hurt, that they had "put her history" in her abdomen, and that it bothered her still. The remark made no sense to me, and I dismissed it, but approached her more carefully. I enfolded her, wrapped her tightly within my arms, and placed my lips against hers. I felt their warmth, their shape, beneath the sheet. It was Lona in my arms, no phantasm or figment of my imagination. It was Lona.

Even if it all was happening in my dreams.

I felt the same sensations as I would have experienced if I were awake, tried to distinguish between these impressions and those of the waking state, but could not. I even attempted to placate my disbelief by pointing out the dissimilarity between the experience I was having and the one I would have had if Lona were really alive. Lona would have been less distinct. I'd never seen the features of Lona's face so clearly. It was as though they were intensified, magnified, had taken on an extra dimension. I wanted to clarify what seemed to be an inexplicable situation and found that I couldn't explain it to my own satisfaction, let alone to someone else's.

The encounter had happened inside my head, and no matter how strenuously I insisted that it had happened, other people would always be free to disbelieve. In fact, under ordinary circumstances, I would have been the first to do so. I certainly didn't endorse spirit encounters or making love to women in one's dreams; the only way to make love was in person, in the old-fashioned, fleshly sort of way.

But the episode had happened to me, and I couldn't discount it entirely. It was an experience unlike any I'd ever encountered before. The only comparable thing was my dream about the apple; I'd seen it and felt it and smelled and tasted it, but an apple, no matter how tasty, was not a woman. A woman is

more complex than any Winesap and a lot more pleasant to hold in the palms of one's hands.

I awoke with a sense of regret, a feeling that I was leaving something valuable behind. Normally I awoke from such dreams with a sense of relief, joy at being in predictable surroundings instead of the scatterbrained nonsense of my dreams, but this morning I felt different. I was leaving Lona behind, losing her once more. And losing Lona once had been enough; I had no desire to make it a recurring incident in my life.

I told Julie about the dream, but not about the longings it had stirred; I knew that she would find the bare facts, the appearance of Lona beneath a shroud, difficult enough to deal with. I wasn't able to bait the lioness in her den.

Julie seemed unimpressed by my dream, as she was in general by dreams. I sometimes got lost in mine, thinking they were as fascinating as a novel by Chekov, but she found them pale reflections of the outer world. She didn't even remember most of her dreams and seemed inclined to dismiss them even before they'd materialized in sleep. I, on the other hand, had always enjoyed the spontaneity and playfulness of dreams, even while I disliked their inconsistency and unpredictability - it was an irony that made for interesting viewing.

It was already July, and it seemed that the book about the mother and son murderers was going to be published. The auction had been held, and the contracts were due to be signed within a few weeks. I looked forward to the moment as a drowning man looks forward to a lifesaver. It was a point of solidity in an otherwise unsure universe, something on which I could depend. I whiled away the interval by preparing more research material, organizing the interviews and legal documents that we'd already collected, and transcribing taped interviews. My co-author and I went out to Walpole Prison several more times to talk to the son of the murder team about his crimes, but never succeeded in getting him to admit them. It seemed unlikely that a person could indefinitely deny his involvement in murders in which he'd obviously played an overt role, but he managed to do it, constantly finding new conspiracies to blame for his plight.

I nearly found myself relating to him, in that I kept looking for alternative explanations for what I myself was going through, and none of them seemed to hold any more water than his weak defenses did. I wondered if I too would hang onto my own strained interpretation of things long after the weight of the evidence was overwhelming. I suspected not. I was determined not to sacrifice the truth, even if it meant admitting that I was wrong. After all, if I admitted to communicating with spirit entities, they wouldn't put me away in a prison - in a mental institution, perhaps, but not a prison.

Instead of laboring under illusions, I tried to summon them so that I could study them further, dissect them with the fine blade of my reason. I didn't have to wait long. The night after I'd seen Lona in my dream, the forces of immortality raised the possibility of life after death once more.

This time, the strange effects began to occur before I'd had a chance to fall asleep. I was lying in bed, with Julie at my side, when I heard a strange and unexpected sound: a loud, metallic ping followed by the sound of water rushing down a metal tube. It resembled the sound that you hear when, while cleaning a pool you lift up the long-handled net and the water rushes down its metal core. I couldn't

think of anything else I'd ever heard that made quite this sort of sound. Our next-door neighbors had a pool, but I doubted that they were cleaning it at three in the morning. I was about to get up to investigate its source when I heard another sound, as though some kid had bounced a ball off our roof and the ball was now dribbling to rest on the deck behind our home - talk about a strange series of noises! I got up, investigated, and as I was now growing accustomed to discovering, found nothing out of the ordinary. There was no reasonable explanation for these uninvited stirrings in my auditory canal.

I returned to bed, but no sooner had my head sunk on the pillow than I heard a bell peal in my left ear, a clear, single shiver of metal sounding the end of a day. I jumped up and searched the house again, certain that the kids were responsible - Joanne was playing "Simon Says" in the basement or using up her unexpended energy with a xylophone - but I was wrong. The house was empty of any activity except the slow, susurrous breathing of sleeping people.

By this time, I was becoming convinced that someone or something was trying to get in touch with me, pressing his, her, or its finger to psychic doorbells. I went down into the basement, intending to make myself available, if anyone so desired.

I turned off the lights, lay down on my little bed, closed my eyes, and said, "I'm here. If there's something you want to tell me, get it off your chest so that I can get back to bed."

I didn't expect anything to happen, and I was right. I lay there for nearly an hour, searching my insides as well as the room about me, but noticed nothing out of the ordinary. I was warm, but it was in the sixties outside; I felt the bed beneath me, but no unanticipated pains, and saw nothing but blackness around me. I was surprised by the complete lack of interesting phenomena. There wasn't so much as a quiver in a sprained toe to keep my enthusiasm alive. I felt myself seeping down toward sleep like silence seeking the source of its stillness. I drifted off momentarily, but awoke again, finding no more goings-on than when I'd departed. Finally I gave up on the search, relinquishing my bed for the comfort of Julie upstairs. I stumbled up the stairway, already half asleep, and found my way into the bedroom; it was now nearly four o'clock.

I had thoughts for nothing but catching a few more hours of sleep before the children woke up and began to bicker with each other, but was startled to find that my body had other ideas. As I slipped in beside Julie, taking her into my arms, I found that I was becoming sexually excited - sexually excited in an undeniable way. My mind was drugged, oblivious to the sensations that were rumbling my lower regions. I couldn't deny the fact that I was responding sexually to Julie's presence, but at the same time couldn't explain why. She was already asleep, and I was anxious to join her, nothing else. I tried to nudge her awake, thinking that she might enjoy a bit of early-morning sport, but she seemed to be beyond the reach of my words; she mumbled something, but was sound asleep before she finished the incomprehensible sentence. I found myself pleased that she'd declined this time - I really wasn't interested in sex at this hour any more than she was - but my body had seemed to think the moment was ripe. I closed my eyes and saw the lights that had eluded me all evening - green and blue lights rippling across my field of vision like searchlights playing across a cloudy sky.

For the past hour, I'd done everything short of rubbing my eyeballs to induce these special effects, and

now, now that I was interested in sleeping, they came of their own accord. I opened and shut my eyes several times, thinking that I'd drive them away, but they persisted, in spite of my efforts. Finally I relaxed in their presence, accepting them as I might entertain the beginning of a dream I was too tired to get up and do something about them, so mentally I just slipped a bit further beneath my covers, hoping for a darkness that would extinguish their phosphorescence, and went to sleep.

I didn't think to associate my sexual urge with the lights until the next day. Then I suddenly recalled my earlier experiences in the basement, when the blue and green lights had appeared when I was thinking of Lona. I also recalled my dream of the preceding night. It seemed that my libido was working overtime and had developed an interest in the occult also. Now not only was my head following Lona to some incomprehensible destination, but my sexual instincts seemed to be coming along as well. I was becoming sexually excited by Lona once more, something that hadn't happened since our divorce.

Seven years had passed between the time Lona and I had met and the day we'd been officially separated. I hadn't thought of that before, but instantly remembered the dream in which I'd seen a note from Lona: "Dear Craigie: I'm very glad that I was able to spend seven years of life, of love, of loveliness with you." I had meant to check that figure out, but now there was no need. I knew what the "seven" referred to: not the length of our marriage, but rather the length of time that we'd been united. I was struck by the remarkable powers of my own subconscious; somehow I'd plucked that figure from my memory and incorporated it into a dream.

It had been a long time since I'd reminisced about the divorce itself; it was one of the least pleasant periods in my life. I was losing my wife, and sensed that I would despite my best intentions and most energetic arguments, and at the same time felt inexorably drawn toward her. I loved her as much as I ever had, perhaps more because of the impending disaster. The impulse to make love to her hadn't diminished with our separation, but had merely been put on Hold. I wanted her as much as ever, but was forced to sublimate, take cold showers, and make believe that the day would arrive eventually when my fantasies once more would come true. But when the divorce became a real prospect, when complaints had been filed and answers issued, I found the thought of never making love to Lona again an intolerable consideration to extend.

I decided to ask her to go away with me for a day or more before saying good-bye the final time. I didn't think that I'd get up enough nerve actually to broach the question, but found myself starting to make plans for our last dalliance. Instead of asking her out loud, I wrote the question down on a slip of paper and took it with me on the day we were to meet with our respective attorneys to discuss the terms of the divorce.

It was an absolutely miserable day. I was angry with myself for having failed to keep the marriage working, and nauseous with nervous tension; I'd never been divorced before or been beheaded by a guillotine, but I suspected that the experiences had much in common. We met in the hallway of the third floor of the Burlington County Courthouse in Mount Holly, a Federalist-design building of red-brick with the obligatory white trim. As soon as I saw her standing outside the courtroom, all the joy that she'd given me welled up inside me like water from an artesian well. I tried to hold my emotions in check, to become the stern-faced defendant in this suit, but couldn't manage the charade. She saw

my pleasure in seeing her and turned away, perhaps afraid that she might be moved by my agony to reconsider her decision.

We met with the attorneys for half an hour, ironing out the details - when I could visit the children, how much I would pay toward their support - but finally they left us alone for a while. We sat, surrounded by the tomes of the courthouse's law library, as nervous as youngsters on a first date. I told Lona that I was upset by what was happening, that I had no desire to let her go, but that I couldn't keep her against her will. I would let her run free, I explained, only because I could hope that she might run back to me eventually. She understood, nodding silently, extending her sympathy if not her affection.

Finally I reached into my pocket and handed her the note. She took it, unfolded it slowly, as though it might contain a spider, and read it carefully twice. She looked up at me, smiled broadly, her entire face mirroring the joy in her lips, and told me, simply, "Yes." I couldn't believe it. We would be divorced, but before that day came, we would make love once more.

I'd never received a better gift, I'd thought, never before had been so thrilled by the prospect of disrobing a gift-wrapped package. I sensed that for some reason I would never decipher, Lona felt the same. But our dream never came true; we were overtaken by our obligations to work, the children, and other people in our lives. The divorce came and went as anonymously as a thief in the night - I worked that day and wasn't even aware that it had happened until the following day - and we had never made love again. I didn't think to bring up the outstanding debt after Lona was remarried, and after I'd married Julie, no longer wanted to. I was perfectly satisfied with my new, unproved sex life, and had no desire to return to the past for gratification.

But now it seemed that some small part of me was lusting after memories, gravitating toward what had been rather than what was. I didn't understand why it was happening; it certainly wasn't the result of any conscious desire on my part. I had even less interest in ghosts than I had in ex-wives, Julie's arguments notwithstanding. Sex with a spirit was even less appealing than sex with a stranger. A stranger and I would have at least one thing in common - a body. But a spirit couldn't even offer that.

I tried to forget my dream and the strange sexual awakening, but it was difficult. My mind kept returning to the incident as a tiger returns to its kill, each time removing a bit more of the meat of the experience, eventually exposing its gray-white bones. Eventually I decided that the carcass was empty, the life had flown, and that I was playing with memories, but nothing more.

My taste for the paranormal was waning, but I still found myself the unwilling recipient of extraordinary dreams. My ability to recall my dreams had increased significantly. I'd go to bed, begin dreaming, and when I awoke, be able to recall five or six separate episodes in amazing detail. It was as though the barriers between my conscious and subconscious were breaking down, as though the thin screen that separated the pools of knowledge and inspiration had sprung little leaks. My subconscious had become more accessible; what transpired in it during my sleep was absorbed by my conscious mind as well and clearly remembered in the morning. It was an amusing development - one's nights became as eventful as one's days - but it was also immensely confusing.

Even after I had fully awakened and had had several cups of tea, I found that the dreams held on, like leeches reluctant to let go though they'd already served their mysterious purpose. My head throbbed with a dull numbness, as though it were anesthetized. I decided that this was the price of trying to resolve rational with irrational experiences. It was like trying to push magnets together when they weren't properly aligned; no matter how forcefully one pushed, when one let go, the magnets jumped away from each other like frogs off a lily pad.

All this wasn't a pleasant sensation, and though I found the novelty of nonstop dreaming intriguing, I wished I'd come to my normal senses, revert to the way I'd been before the dreams had inundated my life with impressions I couldn't explain or make go away. I felt that I was slowly slipping into the dreams, becoming a citizen of their deliberately distorted streets and misshapen homes. I wanted to go back to being a chronicler of other people's problems and quit manufacturing problems of my own. I felt as though my head was slowly being stuffed with cotton and the cotton was now beginning to come out of my ears.

I took a week's vacation, cancelling appointments that I'd made with other mediums and individuals involved in psychic affairs, took the telephone off the hook, and repaired to the innocence of my garden and the Glades. The first crop of corn was already hi, and the tomatoes were on our table; I was still catching flounder and not much more, but the hours in the fresh air did wonders for my mind. I felt a bit guilty about not working on anything related to writing, but told myself that this was therapy, a necessary part of the process. Without the break, I was positive, I wouldn't be able to write anyway. I was physically debilitated by my contact with the world of dreams and spirits, and needed some plain sunshine and lots of fresh vegetables to restore my equilibrium.

But after a week, the symptoms had not gone away. My head was still cloudy with the experiences I'd had, and seemed to be growing worse with the ongoing parade of dreams. I decided that I'd better take some positive step to end this accumulation of detritus and considered whether another session of instant ghosts in the basement might sweep the cobwebs away.

On Monday, July 16, I debated with myself whether or not I wanted to engage the forces of my mind once more, but finally talked my reservations away. Shortly before midnight, I went down to my office, turned on the tape recorder, and just before I lay down on the bed, extinguished the lights. It was a beautiful midsummer evening, with the exception of the midges that blanketed the screens on the windows; they covered the grillwork of wires as sludge cakes an oil filter, preventing the air from flowing through. A few mosquitoes had somehow managed to get in, and buzzed about the darkened room, occasionally alighting on my arm, then shooting away before I could slap them.

I closed my eyes and repeated the procedure that had proved so fruitless the last time I'd tried it. I emptied my mind of conscious thought, relaxed as much as possible, and opened myself to whatever impressions were waiting to stroke my nerve-endings. I expected that this evening too was going to be another no-show, but soon discovered that I was wrong - which was what I generally seemed to be when it came to these phenomena.

The earlier episodes had functioned as something of a beginners' course. I had already encountered the basic ingredients and now was not distraught when they were suddenly bigger and more intense than



they'd been in the past. I might not be ready for advanced downhill, I thought, but I'd apparently progressed to the intermediate slopes.

I recalled that each time I'd seen the blue and green lights, they had seemed related in some way to Lona. But I still found it impossible to believe that the dead visited earthlings in the guise of Christmas-tree lights.

I had read about a phenomenon known as movement phosphene. When one moves one's eyes suddenly while in the dark, one sometimes has a subjective impression of light; for a split second, one sees lights that aren't really there. But I had been lying perfectly still, my eyes steadily fastened on the scene before me; movement phosphene was a far preferable explanation to that of glowing spirits, but it didn't fit the facts.

I began to lose interest in the rolling colors, and as I did, began to notice the physical sensations much more. It was as though I'd been slipped a spinal while I was distracted, but still felt twinges that affected my face. There was a sudden crack of pain across the back of my neck, and everything went numb. I felt as though I'd just dropped through a hole into outer space. My eyes snapped shut tightly, and I sucked at the air as though it had suddenly turned into liquid metal. I couldn't breathe!

The tape recorder listened, unconcerned, as I struggled to pull air down my windpipe. There was a long, tormented anguish of interrupted breathing, then a sudden sibilant rush of wind down my raw throat. I couldn't speak, not even to describe what was happening to me. The sensations were so intense that they blocked out all voluntary activity, preempted the program in progress for a special flash bulletin. It was only after I'd rested for several minutes that I was finally able to gasp some words into the recorder.

"I just had an incredible experience," I explained, sounding like an old man with terminal emphysema. "I was staring at the ceiling, and suddenly I had a feeling of being absolutely horrified, terrified. My mouth opened more and more and more, as though I was going to shriek or scream. Finally my mouth was open incredibly wide and clicked into place, and I heard a crack on the left side of my jaw. I had incredible feelings of my face being distorted, of it being, sort of, just exploding!" I cried. "On the right side in the cheek and jaw area - sort of exploding! My head began to tilt backwards, and then snapped forward forcefully. I had an impression of my neck being elongated."

It was an extraordinary set of sensations, impressions of what were implausible positions, postures the human body could not adopt and survive. I'd thought chills that shook my body in the middle of the night were scary, but they couldn't hold a candle to this.

My body had been folded, spindled, and mutilated while I lay in the comfort of a bed in the basement of my home. It had undergone transformations, had seemed to change, the flesh to rearrange itself on my bones, the bones to rearrange themselves within the context of the skin ... I had become someone else!

I couldn't imagine that I was the source of what I'd felt. There was nothing within me, no incident, no memory, no vicarious experience, that would explain such amazing and overwhelming sensations. If I

had been hypnotized and asked to relive the most physically traumatic moment of my life - my birth - it would have seemed like a vacation.

I lay in the dark, mentally adjuring the lingering sensations to go away, and silently vowing never to travel this road again. I had had it with dark basements and empty minds; like drinking and driving, they didn't mix in any safe way. Slowly I managed to regain control of my senses and found that I was completely exhausted. I reached over in the now normal quiet of the summer evening, the silence broken only by the sounds of insects in the grass, and switched off the tape recorder. I wandered across the darkened room and made my way upstairs like a dead man climbing out of his own grave.

I wanted my bed - or a stiff drink, but unfortunately was not a drinker. I wandered into the bathroom, fell forward into the sink, and splashed grateful handfuls of cold water into my face. I was still alive, I thought - thank God.

I had no feeling that I'd actually been in danger, that there was a possibility I might be physically injured, but the trauma that I had just experienced had exhausted me. I had run an obstacle course for the senses. I'd made it through, and would be fine in a couple of days, but for now I was nothing but a collection of what seemed to be someone else's aches.

I stood, and found my worn face staring back at me from the mirror. I had aged a hundred years. Framing my weary features, my hair hung like torn taffeta curtains. My eyes were empty, and stark with their lifelessness. My skin had the pallor of a sun-bleached corpse. I was frightened to death by what I saw. If I hadn't been so utterly exhausted, I would have called a plastic surgeon, the emergency rescue squad, and a mortician in that order; the first one to arrive would get my business.

I slunk into the bedroom, climbed into bed, and as I lay beneath the covers, sorely chastened, prayed to God that this moment would end.

## Chapter Eleven

The book auction had taken place on July 11, and I was delighted with the result. Julie and I celebrated with Susan, my co-author, over dinner at Susan's house. I was tempted to tell her and her husband about the first book I'd undertaken, the one about Lona and myself, but didn't want to jeopardize our fledgling relationship. I was certain that Susan wouldn't be interested in pursuing a literary career with someone who had his sources confused with spirits; I carefully avoided the subject of my book while Julie and I were sitting at Susan's dining room table.

I wasn't that secretive with George, my fishing partner. I'd told him the basic outline of the book and had filled him in on the details as they'd developed. He seemed somewhat disinclined to believe that I was actually writing a book about my possible communication with my first and now deceased wife. It was as though I'd gone over the precipice and was now hanging by a slender branch. He was anxious to help me back to a ledge, but wondered if it would make any difference, if my sanity could be saved at this late date in the game.

I sensed his incredulity and stopped being quite as forthright with him about my experience, thinking that I didn't want to jeopardize either our friendship or our fishing. It was difficult to find friends who were willing to sit with me on rocks at three o'clock in the morning while I drowned sea worms in the Atlantic. Fishing was fine relaxation, but I was glad that I didn't have to depend on it to feed my family.

The sale of the book about the murderers ensured my financial security for several months. I'd be able to set the magazine articles aside for a while in order to concentrate on the task of researching the second book. It was going to require a trip to South Carolina, because that was where the two murderers had begun their trail of crime, and I looked forward to it, thinking that it'd give me an opportunity to get away from Julie and the girls for a short while. I didn't want to flee from them, but the idea of having a week to myself was appealing.

Susan and I laid plans to continue with the research in Massachusetts until the fall, when a trip to the South would be most convenient for both of us. I debated about the possibility of making it a family vacation, but realized how unworkable that would be. I'd wind up doing no work, and the girls and Julie would wind up feeling guilty because I wasn't accomplishing anything.

Instead I decided to bring back a bit of the South - the regulation T-shirts, which I brought back every time I went away, some pickled corn or smoked ham or whatever else South Carolina had to offer. I knew that gifts wouldn't be the same as seeing Dixie in person, but knew that the girls would accept them as a substitute for being there themselves. Julie was another story; I'd have to bring her something a bit more romantic, possibly a pair of kitchen mittens.

So what if mittens weren't as romantic as moonlight and roses; they kept her hands safe when she was cooking, and that was her second love, coming in just a hair short of reading. I didn't mind the cooking as much as the incessant reading; at least the girls and I profited from her time in front of the stove, but her reading benefited no one but Julie.

I didn't consider the fact that it was probably Julie's way of keeping her cool while I was stirring up spirits in the basement; she hadn't given me any great blessings in the beginning, but had made a tremendous effort to allow me to seek out Lona's soul, despite the fact that it caused her a lot of emotional and mental anguish. I hadn't felt that it was such an ordeal for her - after all, it was I who was being bombarded with inexplicable phenomena - but in retrospect I realized that it was. I also came to understand that for Julie, books were a refuge and always had been.

Afraid of life because of the death of her parents when she was very young, she retreated to a world made safe by its simplicity. She could hold that world in her hands, take it up and put it down at leisure, turn away from it when it disappointed or frightened her, close the book forever if she disliked it. It was a world in which she had the final say, not the author or anyone else; she was the judge of its merits and of its right to continue living. She could cut it off in its prime if she chose, but no one could make her read a page of it if she didn't want to. It is life with its threats that jeopardizes most of our waking hours - and, I supposed, in my case, the sleeping hours as well. I conceded Julie's need for books and tried to overlook the fact that some housework might be left undone because of Charles Dickens & Co.

I wasn't going to cut off my major source of correct spelling and other miscellaneous information, either; Julie was a whizz with words and a storehouse of trivia. When I needed to know the date of the Battle of Hastings, all I had to do was yell upstairs, and the answer came rolling back. Julie didn't forget anything she'd read, so it was much like having a portable reference library sitting in one's living room.

I hadn't even done the reading on the Lona project I'd looked through a few books and an entry or two in the encyclopedia, but Julie had loaded up on books dealing with the paranormal at the local library; she'd read through half a dozen of them before I'd had a chance to glance at the flyleaves. She seemed astonished that so many apparently reliable individuals had written about the subject and fed me bits of information she thought related to my search for Lona's elusive soul. I was grateful for the information, but listened to little of it, still determined to avoid the danger of unconsciously duplicating supernatural phenomena I had read or heard about.

I wanted whatever developed to develop in the dark room of my mind, without the light of someone else's insight tampering with the image I was developing on my own. Julie wanted to be helpful, but I'd decided that the less outside "help" I had, the more likely it was that what I came up with would be true, even if peculiarly personal for a journalist; it would not be tainted by the outside world, but also might not be applicable to the outside world.

I had to take that risk in order to preserve the authenticity of the experience, in order to tell a truth that was untouched by an outsider's well-meant manipulations.

I wanted to take Julie into my confidence, to make her an integral part of my experiences and the book, but knew that she was unprepared to accept anything other than an intellectual involvement. An emotional or personal commitment to the project would have been akin to having sex with two people at the same time, as far as she was concerned. There was room enough in her bed for only one, and that was me; Lona would have to wait outside for the right moment to show me her private secrets of

survival.

I respected her decision and played to it by purposely omitting disturbing details from my accounts and slipping off in daydreams when she began to tell me about a book on the paranormal that she'd read. Occasionally a word or two would slip through, and I'd weigh it like a zoologist cataloging a new form of lilliputian life, a small green creature netted in an unexplored swamp. Once in a while, the information elicited my interest, and I'd come awake, paying attention to what Julie was telling me. In one case, it had proved rewarding.

Julie had told me about a journalist who, at some point in her career, had been afflicted with automatic writing, which would seem to be every writer's dream. She found that when she sat at her desk with a pen and paper in front of her and went into an altered state of consciousness, some force would take over her arm and write in her stead. The messages seemed to represent someone else's thinking, and at first frightened the writer, but later she realized that she had the ability to turn the flow of words off and had relaxed with her newfound ability. The messages in some instances seemed to be from discarnate beings, souls who had shucked their bodies. Sometimes they were evidential, but more often than not they veered off into obscure poetic philosophy, intruding on the writer's more rational view of the world.

I found Julie's interest understandable, wondering what it would be like not to have to sit in front of my typewriter for hours in order to fashion a few pages of decent copy, and realized that it was something I was going to try.

I'd already spent a considerable amount of time in alternative states of consciousness, what with my experiences in the basement and the dreaming that I'd done upstairs, but nothing salable had come out of it. There wasn't a single decent paragraph in the truck-load of experiences I'd had, but I decided that automatic writing was worth at least a single try.

A week after the auction, I conducted my little experiment. I went down to the basement shortly before midnight, when Julie and the kids once more were safely ensconced in sleep, and sat down at my desk. I cleared it off, set a pile of copy paper to my left, and put one sheet directly in front of me. I picked up a Bic and sat there waiting for something to happen. While I waited, my eyes drifted about the room, lighting first on the pinup poster of Loni Anderson thumb-tacked to the wall, lingering there for a few minutes, then drifting to the piles of books, the cartons filled with old photographs, the paperclips and staples scattered on my desk. It wasn't exactly James Michener's study, but it suited my more limited needs just fine, except in the winter, when the thermometer plunged a bit too much for my comfort.

I waited for the sensations to make their will known, for them to intensify or to fade, for them to grow stronger or disappear. I had no idea which route they'd take, and was not particularly anxious that they go one way or the other. Successfully doing automatic writing would be fascinating but frightening, and I would be just as glad to find that it was another fiction perpetrated by journalists more anxious to make a buck than to report on their findings, or lack thereof, accurately.

I stared at my right hand, daring it to do anything that I hadn't instructed it to do, and noticed its finer

details: the white moons on the fingernails, the plump pads of the palm, the veins tracing along the fingers like pale-blue rivers working their way to an invisible sea. I noticed that my fingers had become somewhat numb and that the arm itself was growing leaden, as though it were asleep. I wondered what was happening, but didn't connect these sensations with automatic writing because I hadn't bothered to learn anything more about the phenomenon than what Julie had told me.

A second later, when my hand began to move ever so slightly across the page, I made the connection without being prodded. My hand was moving ever so slowly, jerking its way across the surface of the paper. I watched, amazed, as it scribbled an inconsequential series of doodles across the top of the page.

Now my hand was moving effortlessly. I noticed that when I tried to enhance its antics, to predict what it was about to do and add a bit of muscle to the task, it would suddenly stop, as though it resented my intrusion into its wordless motion. Nothing was appearing on the sheet of paper that made any sense, but I was as dumbfounded by the doodles as I would have been if I had seen sonnets pouring out. I was so amazed by the fact that my hand was moving without any conscious desire on my part, and in fact against my conscious desires to harness and enhance it, that I could not have been more shocked than I already was.

I watched for several minutes, thinking only that I was seeing something that wasn't happening; I had no doubts that, when this all was over, I'd find that the page was completely blank, that I'd merely fantasized the writing. My illusion would be bared by the stark, unmarked whiteness of the paper. In a way, I was glad that there was this secondary check involved. I'd tested for color and solidity, for sound, smell, and taste in my dreams, but once I was awake again, I had no bright-red apple to prove my encounter to an independent witness. I might see Lona in a night-time motel of the mind, but when I returned, I had no key or check-out slip to show that we'd actually seen each other once more.

It was a maddening situation. I was increasingly convinced of the possible reality of my experiences, but increasingly aware of the fact that I could not demonstrate them to others, could not convince the jury beyond a reasonable doubt. Now, this time, it would be different. There was a sheet of paper in front of me, and there was a pen in my hand, so when the sensations finally stopped, there would be proof either that something had happened or something hadn't happened. I'd be thrilled if there was something on the paper when Julie took a look at it, but relieved if there wasn't. In a way, I'd love to be able to write off everything that had transpired as the raving of my subconscious mind, but somehow knew it wasn't going to be that easy.

The pen continued to move back and forth, creating complicated scrawls that signified nothing. They were not as intelligent or telling as the little naked women a businessman might draw on his scratchpad while handling a telephone call. They were absolutely without meaning or apparent reason. I started to send a few signals of my own down the nerve fibers of my arms, trying to correct the scribble and turn some of its unexpected twists and turns into a recognizable letter or word, but each time I did, the hand stopped cold, like a lover who is anxious to make all her own moves. I may have had the best of intentions, but they interfered with the climax that was building in a body other than my own. I didn't like the left-out feeling, but, like most married men, had experienced it before in more familiar situations. I decided to let her have her say, to let her make it happen her way, if that

was the only way it was going to happen at all.

I had the distinct feeling that the contours of my hand were changing, that the fingers were growing finer, more feminine in shape. I couldn't see any difference, couldn't detect the slightest change in the outward symmetry of the fingers, but was convinced that they were changing. I could nearly imagine blood-red fingernail polish on the nails as the sensations intensified. I knew that nothing was really happening, but my subjective impression - what I felt - urged me otherwise, insisting that this hand was no longer my own, but belonged to someone else. I wanted to ask Julie to join me, to have her monitor what was happening and let me know whether or not I was losing my mind, but she was sleeping upstairs, and I couldn't bring myself to disturb her. Instead I recited my observations to the tape recorder.

"My hand is writing," I told it, my voice betraying my own amazement. "Moves very smoothly, very effortlessly. It's as though it was someone else's hand. It goes to the left-hand edge of the paper and then turns back; it goes to the right-hand side of the paper and stops half an inch from the edge."

It reminded me of the stylus on a graphing machine, sweeping back and forth across the paper, fluctuating in synchronicity to psychic forces which I didn't accept, let alone understand. Then suddenly the smooth, back-and-forth motion changed abruptly.

"Now it's going across the page from the left to the right in little mountains, up and down, up and down; now it's coming back from the right, doing the same sort of thing, and running off the left-hand side of the page."

My hand had been turning sheets of paper into a wasteland of illegible doodles for nearly fifteen minutes, and I imagined myself sitting here for the rest of the night manufacturing confetti, scrawling away, then tearing up my compositions in disgust. Determined not to let that happen, I decided to intervene in the same unobtrusive way as I had during the other episodes here in the basement: I posed a question mentally, wondering whether my hand would now respond, as the chills and blue-green lights had answered my earlier entreaties. I feared that it might, and didn't know what I'd do in that event.

It was one thing to ask a question and have a chill, but something quite different to ask a question and get a written response. It was like the difference between being told "We'll call you" and having your application for credit marked "Refused" - the net effect was the same, but seeing it down in black and white made it seem much more objectionable.

"Do you have a message for me?" I asked whoever might be listening in to my mind. "Anything, a one-word message," I encouraged my unseen scribbler.

A sudden strong chill convulsed my body with cold; I bent forward across the desk, reacting to the unexpected assault automatically, without thinking, protecting the organs that mattered - the heart, lungs, and liver - from another blow. A second chill swept through my body, shaking my hand with its power. My arm stiffened like a whip cracked to its full length, and my hand jiggled at its end like a remote-control toy at the end of a wire. It was as though someone was throttling my arm. My eyes

opened with the shock of the experience, then winced shut tightly as though in pain. Behind my eyelids, the world went dark - pitch-black and as empty as interstellar space. I felt as though I was nowhere, as though I had ceased to exist.

I was dimly aware of my arm and of the fact that it was awkwardly scratching across the paper, but it seemed like the memory of something I'd left behind, a piece of luggage, which I pictured sitting in a railroad station, where I'd inadvertently left it. It was no longer me, no longer mine. My hand belonged to someone else, who had seen it lying in the station, unused, unwanted, and had taken it for his own. My shirts would now cover someone else's chest, my ties be knotted about his throat. I might recognize them as mine, but they were being used by someone else.

The paroxysm of chill and muscular tension lasted for perhaps five minutes. It was like a brief introduction to the joys of suspended animation; I had the feeling that I had stopped, and like an engine on a cold morning, was waiting for someone to crank me back to life. I was breathing normally and noticed no other alarming physical sensations, so I indulged what was happening as dispassionately as I could.

In the same way, I imagined, victims of torturers might block out their sense of pain, attempt to project it onto someone else, someone whose pain they understand, whose cries reach their ears, but, in the final analysis, someone other than themselves. It was only by rejecting the notion that I was experiencing a cataclysm that I could possibly survive. I stopped trying to figure out what was happening, and instead, like a surfer coping with a mountainous wave, rode it, followed its movements as gracefully as I possibly could, and hoped for a safe outcome. I had no idea where this Bonzai Pipeline beauty would deposit me, but I hoped that the pieces could be put back together in some recognizable shape.

Eventually the anguish of the moment seemed to subside, like a wave cresting and dying. Small shivers of water were sliding toward the shore instead of the churning cauldron of white water that had threatened me seconds before. I found that the chills were dissipating, like small fish scattering among a forest of seaweed, and the tension had suddenly subsided, as though I were a wet rag and something had twisted me into an angry knot, squeezed out every ounce of my inner self, then dropped me, limp and lifeless, onto the floor.

My eyelids flickered open painfully, as though no longer used to the light, fitfully peeking out to see if the world remained the same. I glanced from left to right, deciphering the shape of the desk, then blinked my eyes several times, focusing on smaller objects, like a person who has been in a dark place and is suddenly thrust into bright light. I saw the familiar accoutrements of my profession: the typewriter, the stacks of copy paper, the box of carbon paper.

The world seemed to be the same during my momentary escape. I wanted to be sure that I had imagined that something profound was happening, and glanced down at the paper before me. I hoped to see that it was empty, or barring that, to take it upstairs to Julie, who would tell me that it was empty; the former was definitely the more desirable of the two alternatives, but at this point even a mild mental condition seemed preferable to the one explanation that was becoming less and less easy to dismiss.



I saw the familiar scribbles, which I'd noted before my eyes had clamped shut, but now there was something else on the page. There were shapes, movements of line which were meaningful, which fit together into crude but strangely graceful letters. It was like the ornate writing of a child who is entranced with her own artistry, letters that added up to something other than random gibberish. I tried to discount it, to drive the letters away; I didn't want to face up to their terrible reality.

But I found this impossible.

There on the desk in front of me sat a sheet of paper bordered with ornate curlicues and arabesques of ink, but in the center of it someone had written a single word:

LONA

I saw it, but didn't believe it. I had a hard time believing Julie when she told me that she saw it too.

I Xeroxed the strange, perplexing page half a dozen times before I finally conceded that the word was there.

## Chapter Twelve

I decided to abandon the book about Lona. I could not make any sense out of what had happened already, and it seemed impossible to control or elicit additional experiences in any sort of coherent and meaningful way. It was like playing marbles in a gumball factory - not impossible, perhaps, but it tended to get a trifle confusing.

I mentally scratched the project off of my list of things to do and proceeded to the second item, the book about the mother and son murderers. I'd been so busy with the paranormal that I'd fallen behind schedule, and so I decided to get busy. There were an enormous number of tapes which had to be transcribed

- recordings of interviews with the subjects, chiefs of police, and other characters in the complicated tragedy
- and today seemed like the perfect time to get at them.

I worked on the pile of cassettes all day and well into the evening, turning an hour's worth of tape into sixteen single-spaced pages. There was an immense amount of material involved in the preparation of this book, I thought, and all of it as simple as ABC, as incontrovertible as the First Law of Thermodynamics.

The First Law of Thermodynamics was not subject to change or to abridgement or confined to performing only when certain conditions were met by chance. It worked each time, every time, and was a joy for that reason. I wished that things had gone so well with the time that I'd wasted in my vain attempt to research Lona's soul. Lona would have been better off, I concluded, if she had been an open flame rather than a person. I knew where a flame went when its fuel, oxygen, or heat was removed: out. I had no such definitive statement to make about what happened when a person died, whether the personality or emotions or intellect lingered on in any perceptible or recognizable way.

My experience with the mediums tended to suggest that they might linger, but stopped short of proving it; the mediums had told me things that I already knew, so I had to admit the possibility that by some combination of insightfulness or ESP or both they had managed to mine my subconscious in order to produce the nuggets that had so amazed me.

I would have been glad to accept their explanations if only they had offered me a single shred of actual proof, some hunk of gold that would stand the test of the assayer, would turn out to be ninety-nine percent pure and not pyrite. I realized that the mediums had told me some things that I hadn't known about, but I didn't know whether or not these were accurate. The accuracy of these items seemed the one thing I should check out before writing off the project. I mentally committed myself to that additional bit of research, but had already decided on the outcome. Put to the test, the unknown material would probably prove to be inaccurate.

Late that evening, though, I had occasion to reconsider. As I was typing up an interview with the young man who had helped his mother murder his stepfather, I found that my hands were misbehaving. As I typed, the fingers would suddenly lose all muscular tension and would drop into

my lap, as though someone had suddenly turned off the juice to my hands. I replaced them on the keys several times, thinking that I was merely tired and needed a few minutes' rest, but each time, after a few more minutes of typing, the power went off again, as though someone were sitting in the dark of my personal basement, flicking off the switch as soon as I turned my back.

It happened half a dozen times before I noticed that my right arm was also growing numb. I associated it immediately with the sensation I'd felt the night before during the automatic writing episode. I wondered if the feelings that I'd had then were somehow being rekindled, like lumps of black coal suddenly bursting spontaneously into flame. I avoided the notion, as though it were untenable as well as unacceptable, and tried to transcribe, but found that I couldn't; after a few minutes of typing, the fingers lost their muscular tension, as though they were sponges from which the energy was being squeezed.

Finally, despairing of getting any more work done that night, and hoping to draw off the power that was turning my hands into useless instruments, to discharge the psychic electricity by using it up, I decided to try automatic writing once more. This time, the experience was much as it had been the night before, but much more intense, if that were possible, and a hundred times more productive. The spirit, or whatever was guiding my hand, progressed from its interesting doodles to letters and words within a matter of minutes and soon was answering my questions about as well as a nine-year-old might.

I asked if it had a message for me, but the scrawls persisted, wondered whether it had a message for anyone else in my home, with the same result. I posed half a dozen questions before I struck the vein of gold.

"Is Lona still alive?" I asked.

It was the essential, the basic, question, which summarized what the past months had been all about. All I really wanted to know was whether or not Lona still existed, if there was some part of her somewhere in the universe which I would recognize as belonging to my ex-wife.

The hand started, like lovers discovered in their bower in the woods by a troop of hiking boy scouts; it lurched across the page toward the left-hand corner and began to scrawl in large, elaborate letters.

"YES," came the reply.

The script was beautiful, the letters at least four inches high, and I thought how unlike Lona's handwriting they were; hers had been clerical in its neat efficiency, but each of these letters was an individual work of art. I marveled at the beauty of the simple but powerful forms. I was astounded by the message, more than I had been by any of the telegrams that Irene and Lillian had delivered, and wanted to know more, wanted to have confirmed or denied the validity of its implication that yes, there was life after death.

I asked another question. "Does Lona want me to tell her husband, Elek, what I've been doing recently? Does she want him to know about this experience?"

Without hesitation, the hand raced to the upper left-hand corner of a fresh piece of paper and excitedly, moving with an enthusiasm that seemed to transmute the letters themselves, wrote, "Yes, Yes!" affixing an exclamation point to the tail end of the second word.

I still had no idea what this was, who this was, that was so cleverly manipulating my fingertips and suddenly realized that I had yet to ask the most obvious of questions.

"Who is this?" I demanded to know.

There was no answer; my hand moved up and down like that of a child drawing an endless series of waves, sharp little w's that washed from one edge of the page to the other, their stark symmetry unmoving in its reticence.

"Who are you?" I asked again. "What are you?" I implored.

No answer; the hand moved up and down, tirelessly practicing its w's for an upcoming penmanship contest. "Is this Lona?" I asked, the idea striking me as the most bizarre of the evening. Immediately a strong chill filled my body, like iced tea poured into a thermos, and my eyes winced shut; I felt myself falling into a bottomless hole, surrounded by infinite blackness, walls of the hole a million miles away, and the bottom receding faster than the speed of light; I would never touch a solid footing again. I floated down, alarmed by my plight, but realizing that like an anchor tossed off the bow of a boat, I was still connected to the world of sun and clouds by a solid line; I was momentarily buried in a blue-green abyss, but I had not completely lost my hold on the world.

As my hand jerked strangely up and down and across the page, the jet-black inkiness had been suffused with boiling sheets of the familiar blue and green lights. I watched, entranced by the vivid colors and by their mysterious meaning, even while I tried to interpret what my hand was doing. It shot up, then down, then off to the left side of the page, then straight across to the right, then down to the left again; it made no sense that I could decipher. I was apparently getting more noncommittal doodles.

I wasn't surprised in the least; it seemed that whenever one attempted to phi the paranormal down, it became as coy and reluctant as a virgin waiting for her wedding night. I knew that I'd once more backed this elusive and illusory ability of mine into a corner and would once more come face to face with the fact that I was producing these phenomena - not intentionally, not even willingly, but permitting details to escape from my subconscious that took on a bewildering variety of forms and completely confused me. It was like being asked to pick out a photograph of one's back from among a hundred similar photos; one knew that it was there, but was not at all familiar with what it looked like, and presented in such a bewildering context, it seemed as strange as the far side of the moon.

Your back was in the pile of eight-by-ten glossies, but there was no way to identify it as your own.

I waited for my hand to stop moving, and forced open my eyes; once more, it was like walking into the sun after spending a week in a deep cave. My eyes flared with pain, watering as though trying to

purge their discomfort. I glanced around again, orienting myself, and then, expecting to find large angular doodles, looked down at the paper.

The sheet was emblazoned with two bold stars, as though I had been graded for my guess that this contact was with Lona. I laughed out loud, thinking of the gold and silver stars that teachers affixed to homework and music lessons when I was a child. A gold star meant perfect; it was the ultimate accomplishment. It was the final proof that one had truly succeeded.

I seemed to hear Lona's voice as I stared, dumbfounded, at the twin stars.

"You've been searching for me for months now, dummy," she seemed to say. "Who did you think you'd eventually find - the Ayatollah Khomeini?"

It was a compliment as well as a joke at my expense, an admission that, after all these perplexing weeks, it could be that what was happening to me might really have something to do with Lona: that I had been communicating with her in ways that were completely incomprehensible to me. This kind of communication could be likened to that of a chimpanzee sitting in front of a television set. He sees and hears, but it makes no sense to him; it's not communication, it's an unexplained and seemingly meaningless phenomenon.

I was the chimpanzee, and someone had just told me that that strange dancing light was not a mirage or hallucination, but rather Walter Cronkite. Walter Cronkite!

Give the chimp two stars!

I laughed for several minutes, enjoying the humor. It was a human way of saying something, a message with a face behind it, not some cold recorded statement, such as, "The number you have reached is not in working order." It seemed impossible to contemplate my question and this answer without feeling something for the source of the answer; it was a personal experience.

But even while I delighted in my apparent discovery, I realized that because it was a personal experience, it was worthless as objective proof. It meant a great deal to me - I felt as though I had established a link with Lona - but to an outside observer, those two stars could easily be seen as senseless, without any overt meaning.

I still had no proof. I had a growing conviction, but nothing on which I could base a successful stand against the skeptics. In fact, if I had been asked to review the data, I would have been among the first to attack it and to point out its subjectivity and many flaws. One does not do good science or good journalism by constantly asking subjects, "What do you feel?" It is what one knows and is able to demonstrate that turns theories into facts and fiction into reality.

I asked a few more questions, and my hand answered with plain "Yes" and "No," indicating that no elaborate messages would be forthcoming tonight. It wrote "November" when, trying to trip this spirit up, I asked in which month she'd been born. Lona's birthday was November 10, but again, it was something I already knew, and thus not evidential. I was anxious to make the most of the experience,

but it seemed that the movements were growing weaker, that the fingers were winding down like an alarm clock that has run out of spring, and I reluctantly admitted that this session was quickly drawing to an end.

I was determined to tell Lona the one thing that I would have wanted her to know if she were alive, if I had had a chance to see her before she had leaped from that plane. I recalled the morning after I had learned of her death, when I stood in front of the sea pond, watching the seagulls ride the first waves of the sun's light into the new day's sky and hearing my words drop like pebbles into the water.

"Do you know that I loved you?" I asked.

The hand, which had been moving gently back and forth, up and down, like a recording pen diagramming the static on a line, came to a stop. It lay there, like a guard standing silent, frozen watch at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, then, with no explanation, deserted its post, slipping off the paper and dropping into my lap.

I didn't have to ask another question to understand that the automatic writing was over for the evening.

The experience had come to an end, but I wasn't as shaken as I had been the night before; it had wound down gradually, giving me a chance to recover from the shocks to my nervous system. Slowly I recovered the normal use of my faculties, even as the extraordinary sensations subsided. I felt strangely refreshed, not only emotionally, but physically, as well. It was after eleven o'clock at night, but I was alert and anxious to do some more work. I'd neglected Julie during the day, though, and decided that, rather than transcribing more of the tapes, I'd go upstairs and spend a bit of time with her before bed.

I found her in the living room, watching the evening News. I sat down beside her, held her hand, and began to tell her about what had just happened in the basement. She was absolutely enthralled. It was one thing, I guessed, for me to be seeing strange lights, but something else when I was duplicating a performance that she had read about and therefore was part of her reality as well as part of mine. She was fascinated by my cursory description and begged me to tell her more, asking what the writing had felt like as well as what it had seemed to say.

I demonstrated the motion, holding out my hand like the stylus of a recording pen and letting it sweep effortlessly from side to side, as buoyant as a balloon tethered to the hinge of my elbow; she watched, fascinated, as my fingers stroked back and forth, combing the air without a sound.

I realized as I was doing this that in fact I wasn't. It suddenly occurred to me that my hand was still moving of its own accord; I was not running the show, not directing its course. It was floating back and forth of its own volition. It was not an easy concept for me to grasp. The distinction between voluntary and involuntary functions is a difficult one to make and one that scientists are having increasing trouble pinning down. It is now known that individuals can control respiration, heartbeat, brain-wave activity and other bodily functions formerly thought to be involuntary and therefore beyond the realm of conscious control. This, however, seemed to be the opposite case: a normally voluntary action occurring involuntarily.

The only close analogy that came to mind was a hypnotized person whose arms suddenly float like a balloon above his head; he knows that he is not making his arms move, but would be hard pressed to prove it to a witness.

I knew that my hand was now moving of its own accord. "This is the way my hand moved," I told Julie, who watched it as though it was an Alan Bates film. "As a matter of fact, I'm not moving it now," I added.

She turned away from the hand and looked into my eyes. "You're not moving it now?" she asked.

"No," I admitted. "This is exactly what was going on downstairs."

"Stop it!" she barked, like a terrier that has been stepped on while sleeping. "That isn't funny - not funny at all."

I was reluctant to let the opportunity drop and playfully, acting out a transformation into a Lon Chaney character, reached threateningly for her throat.

"Stop it, Craig," she warned me. "Not funny - not even a little bit."

I dropped my hand into my lap, kidded Julie out of her residual fears, and then turned back to the News. Ever since I'd begun working for newspapers, I'd spent at least an hour each day watching the television news. It was one of my few real addictions. And when 60 Minutes and the other news-magazine shows had begun to appear, I'd welcomed them like a strung-out junkie greeting an overdue pusher. It was a fascination with the day's events, with what had happened to whom, when, where, why, and how, rather than printer's ink, that flowed through my veins.

I was incorrigible. Julie dropped out, heading for bed, before the sports report came on, but I, even though I had no interest in baseball, stayed on, unwilling to forego a single statistic. It was a professional exercise. Other men did calisthenics before they went to bed; I watched the News until I worked up a healthy sweat.

As I sat there, with my right arm lying on the arm of the sofa, I noticed that my fingers were creeping forward, their first digits extending, hooking on the fabric, and then pulling the hand along. I couldn't believe that the automatic writing was continuing without benefit of either paper or pen, but it seemed to be happening. I watched as my hand made its way to the end of the arm and then fell into my lap, like a duck falling from the sky into the arms of a hunter.

I was a trifle annoyed that this experience was not ending when it was supposed to, was lingering on like a hangover or a bad dream. I replaced my arm on the arm of the sofa and went back to the Weather. Soon my fingers began to exercise again, creeping across the sofa like Marines on their bellies in boot camp. I turned from the TV again and watched as they moved forward and once more dropped into my lap. I was getting a little tired of this apathetic performance and decided not to encourage it. I left my hand where it had fallen.

The Tonight Show came on, and night owl that I was, I lingered, hearing the rain still thumping down on the deck and occasionally splattering against the window, and was hooked by the end of the monologue. I probably wouldn't get to bed before one, if I was lucky, and if there was anyone interesting on the Tomorrow Show, might be up until two. I thanked the network stars that there wasn't any The Morning After the Tomorrow Show, or I might have lived my life without ever having gotten any sleep.

I was waiting for Carson to introduce his first guest when I realized that my hand was still not resting. The left hand lay at my side, where I'd placed it half an hour ago, but my right hand was now moving down my thigh toward my right knee; I watched as the fingers uncurled, grabbed at the material of my bathrobe, inched forward by retracting like the claws of a cat, then uncurled once more. The hand was light on my skin, as though it were nearly weightless, and it produced a pleasant tingling sensation in the skin of my thigh. I decided to see what it was up to, like a person watching an ant to see what it intends to do with its newfound sugar cube.

The hand moved down toward the knee, rested there like a squat vulture on a perch, then moved back toward my thigh, grazing the skin as soft as a spring breeze. It crept across the thigh, hesitated, then fell into my lap, apparently exhausted by its thigh-to-knee-and-back-again trip. I was growing more and more confused by this persistent phenomenon, but figured that the gasoline had finally run out. My right hand seemed as docile and unadventurous as my left. I went back to the mind-numbing mass of late-night TV.

I was getting into the zen of watching Carson when my right hand moved up, coming to life like a grub coming to life when its log is disturbed. It raised itself up like a spider doing pushups, the fingers pressing inward stiffly, lifting the hand in the process. I watched as the performance continued. The hand moved up off my lap, then dropped in its tracks, as though exhausted, only to rise once more.

By this time, I was growing more interested in my own antics than in Carson's and reached over to turn off the set. I lay back, closed my eyes, and tried to relax, thinking that it was time for both me and my hands to turn in for the night. Slowly, before my closed eyelids, the lights began to form - swirls of cream ebbing in a universe of black coffee, soon turning into the blue and green forms I'd just switched off in the basement; they were back, and I found myself wondering what for.

The automatic writing was done for, the paper and pen put away, my office locked up for the night, but something was brewing. I tried to empty my mind of thought, unconsciously acceding to the wishes of the unseen entity, and found that faint chills were beginning to tease my senses. They were a pleasant sensation, devoid of the shock of the earlier episodes, and seemed to send me further into the tranquil world of mindlessness that I'd once more slipped into. I gave myself up to it, promising myself that the first time there was a painful twinge, I was going to call it a night and go to bed.

My hand seemed to be gaining strength, like a locomotive slowly accumulating steam, its wheels slipping on the polished surface of the tracks and finally catching hold. It moved back and forth across my thigh easily, lightly stroking the skin in much the same way as it had caressed the paper; it was a bit embarrassing, I considered, but the only person present was myself ... and ... I had no idea, but, since I couldn't see them or even prove they existed, was inclined to ignore their possible presence.



I waited for the hand to drop in its tracks, for the engine to sigh one last great puff of steam and grind to a halt, but the pressure kept on building. My hand clutched at the flesh of the thigh as though it were baker kneading dough, the power in the fingers grew stronger, more assertive, as though someone had slipped them on like gloves. I was now really curious. It was one thing to have a recording stylus on the end of one's arm; it was something else entirely to have someone else's living, moving hand there, and not having any idea what it intended.

I thought of my earlier joke, when I'd pretended to have a possessed hand that was reaching for Julie's throat, and mentally envisioned my hand strangling me like some demented creature out of a Japanese horror movie: *The Hand That Strangled Milwaukee*. Soon the, model jets would sweep in and strafe the fingernails off, and that would be the end of it.

As soon as I was thinking of something else, the hand made its move, slipping beneath the folds of my bathrobe and landing on bare skin. Hmmm, I thought, this was becoming more and more interesting, if increasingly perverse. I sat there, my mind newly alert to the situation, and mentally kept an eye on my hand, wondering whether its intentions were honorable or otherwise. I didn't have to wait long for an answer; the hand began to stroke me in a very intimate fashion.

I couldn't believe that this was happening, and tried to sort out the experience in my mind: I was sitting in a sofa in my living room, thinking about nothing at all, and now, for no apparent reason, my hand had taken it into its mind, or imagination, to indulge in a bit of erotica. I'd never had anything like this happen before, and found it hard to envision the series of short circuits in my subconscious that could possibly produce such an unlikely reaction. Intellectually I resisted what was happening, finding it an affront to my control of my body, at the same time as I found myself succumbing to the strange sensations that were blossoming within me. I had never experienced the like. It was as though the pleasure welled up from inside me rather than trickling in through the surface. I had the distinct feeling that the powerful surges that were beginning to flush my senses were originating outside my body but were somehow perceived within it. It was as though I had become that aboriginal TV receiver and had a moving show taking place inside me.

My mind remained a complete blank. I did not see or hear anything and after a few minutes stopped trying to decipher anything, but my body was responding as though I'd just been thrown into a pool of harem women. I had never felt such overwhelming physical sensations. They were hallucinatory, I guessed, never having tried mescaline or LSD, but imagining that this must be the sort of heightened experience of which their devotees spoke.

I concentrated my attention on my hand, trying to discover more clearly what this was all about, and realized that it was no longer my hand. The fingers were longer and thinner, with a fineness about them that mine didn't have. They were a woman's hands, and the work that they were doing was a woman's work; it was like nothing I would have imagined, but rather had the tentative, exploratory nature of someone else's exploration. I suddenly recognized the touch in a way that I couldn't describe. It was like hearing a voice one hasn't heard for ten years and immediately knowing whom it belongs to, knowing in a way that defies rational explanation in its sureness and clarity. It was Lona's hand!

It had been years since I'd held Lona's hand, let alone had it peruse my body as now, but I knew it as certainly as I knew my own face or name. It was Lona! I suddenly found myself transported with affection for her, feeling close to her in a way that I hadn't in more than five years. I wanted to draw closer, to embrace her as well as be embraced by her, but was confused by my situation.

I listened to the fingers, carefully studied the song of their movements, tried to envision what was really happening, as opposed to what seemed to be, and found myself seduced toward a belief in the hereafter, dragged down a sensuous path toward a conclusion that the mind couldn't believe, to which reason could not possibly lead.

The tension built within my body, but the fingers didn't seem to notice. They were awkward, not responding to my desires and needs, but to those of something outside me; finally, though, like two lovers who have found each other's point of pleasure, our desires seemed to synchronize, to mesh with one another's inextricably. I soared up through the top of my head like fireworks through the roof of a house, and found myself in deep space.

There was no light, no sound, no semblance of anything real; all was quiet bliss, as intense as anything I'd ever felt, and completely unlike anything I'd ever felt. I had discovered something new beneath the sun, I thought, as my senses groped for a footing, reached out, and found that the world had expired but left them intact and tingling violently. It was an incredible experience, and one I thought must come only once during a life; if it were to come twice, it would surely prove fatal.

My hand dropped over me protectively, mothering me, seemingly saddened. I recalled the day before our divorce when we had sat, two average people lost within the legalities of the Burlington County Courthouse, and she had smiled at me, and said, Yes, we would make love once more before we parted. It had never happened.

But now it had.

I waited for the sensations to subside, for my body to return to some semblance of normalcy, and after fifteen minutes, I seemed to be on the ground again. I could once more feel the sofa beneath me, hear the sound of the persistent rain, make out the odor of our evening meal, which lingered in the air like the echo of old incense. I was alive again, it seemed; it was a disappointment, but at the same time a decided relief. I had wondered if my flight would ever touch down after such a startling takeoff; I'd suspected that I'd escaped the earth's atmosphere and was heading on a one-way trip into the far reaches of space. But now, miraculously, I was home and none the worse for wear.

For the first time in my life, I thought I must know how astronauts felt when shaky terra firma rose up to kiss their boots.

I was shaken awake by my unearthly experience, and after reorienting myself for a few minutes, found that I was hungry. I went out into the kitchen, found a day-old bagel, and slipped it into the toaster oven. When it popped out two minutes later, I took out the butter and began to butter it.

As I chopped away at the cold butter, I realized how awkward my movements were; I was hacking the butter into little lumps, then grinding them into the warm dough. I stared at my hand, appraised what I was telling my fingers to do, and realized that the two things bore little relation to each other; my right hand was still moving involuntarily, chiseling away at the butter and grinding it down into the hide of the bagel in the way that a young child might.

I was amazed, but by this point disinclined to call a halt to anything, so weak that I would probably have been reluctant to respond to anything short of a three-alarm fire. I let the hand continue with its mutilation of my bagel, then returned to the living room and turned the TV on again. Carson was still holding forth with a series of one-liners. I sat down on the sofa and began munching, gradually immersing myself in the humor; I had been watching for about five minutes when I suddenly noticed that I was still chewing my first bite of bagel. The bagel had long since been reduced to a watery pulp, but my teeth chomped up and down powerfully, decisively, like those of some great carnivore; never before had a bagel been so thoroughly masticated.

I swallowed, feeling a bit guilty about my oversight, and then noticed that my hand was raising the bagel to my lips before I'd requested it to: automatic writing was one thing, but automatic eating, I thought, was taking matters entirely too far - I'd always managed eating pretty well. I took another bite of bagel and noticed how foreign my teeth and tongue felt; I was unpleasantly aware of their feeling, of the crisp delineation of their movements.

It was like suddenly becoming aware of one's nose and deciding that it had no place in the middle of one's face.

I threw the bagel away, realizing that it was best that I go to bed and try to forget the entire evening. If I ever mentioned it to Julie, she'd file for divorce, and if I told anyone else, he would undoubtedly try to have me committed. I suspected that the latter was the more reasonable course of action, but no matter how I tried to downplay the incident or to explain it away, I kept coming back to the fact that these experiences were neither preceded nor followed by any other hallucinations, that during them I remained intellectually aware of my surroundings and physical condition, regardless of the intensity of the sensations I was feeling, and that despite my desire to disprove them, to confine them to some category of strange but natural phenomena, I was more convinced than ever that they were real, that they were symptomatic of something that existed.

Even if I couldn't see it.

And even if I couldn't explain it.

I returned to the kitchen, turned on the water in the sink, and began to rinse my dish. I stood there, my right hand flicking the crumbs from the plate beneath the rush of cold water, and suddenly realized that I was stroking the plate rather than washing it. I was intensely aware of the feeling of the water and of the smooth, wet polish of the china beneath my middle fingertip. It was as though I hadn't felt water for years, hadn't felt a wet dish in my hands for years, and was now glorying in the experience,

I watched with fascination as that finger arched up like a scythe about to strike, and clicked down

twice on the rim of the plate, as though sounding its quality; the china tinkled twice beneath the fingernail.

As soon as I saw it, I recognized the mannerism, and I recalled Lillian's passing reference to it. At the time I hadn't been able to place it, didn't recognize it as belonging to anyone I'd known.

"This lady does show me something with her fingernail," Lillian had said. "So I'm going to say either that she had it very long, or when she would talk, she would tap. Okay, this was something - not mad, but a tap. And I'm going to have to use the word 'wife' with you."

It was Lona's mannerism. I had seen it a million times as she'd stood washing dishes or sat at the kitchen table or toyed with a drink. The middle finger of her right hand clicked down, tapping cleanly, concisely, for no particular reason, eliciting tiny peals from china, Formica, and glass.

It was a familiar habit that I'd never isolated, never recognized and filed away in my mind; but like Lona's voice, it evoked immediate and undeniable memories.

I wondered how much longer I'd be able to maintain my disbelief.

## Chapter Thirteen

The following weeks were filled with the trivia of interminable ordinary living, a never-ending series of small chores and small responsibilities fulfilled; I was constantly in demand, it seemed, as a mender of broken items and a provider of transcripts and new interviews for the book about the murders. The time passed quickly, and I was glad about it, pleased that I had few spare moments in which to mull over the experience that had shaken my disbelief in spirits to the core, and I didn't want to have the occasion to question my conviction again.

It was a lot more comfortable believing that what you saw was what you got, and that there wasn't anything more waiting in the wings to surprise you when you least expected it. I found that the strain of dealing with the supernatural was more than I'd bargained for and less productive than I'd hoped for, and had again started to dismiss the idea of writing a book about it. I was completely involved in the research for the other book and preparing to head south with Susan to begin the first large chunk of work in South Carolina.

Fortunately I was able to get off on a Sunday morning in mid-September without having the paranormal pursue me to the airport. It seemed that I'd given the spirits the slip; there had been a few minor incidents, but no major falls from grace. I had seen the lights again on several occasions and had been troubled by the chills, which seemed loath to leave, even though it was summer, but I hadn't seen any forms flitting about on the ceilings. It seemed that the experiences were slowly winding down, like an old-fashioned record player that nobody had bothered to rewind; the sound was growing deeper, more strained, and beginning to scratch to a halt. I looked forward to the moment, savoring the silence in anticipation.

The flight down to Columbia, South Carolina, was a pleasant one, and I found myself drifting off periodically. I was high above the clouds, heading for a strange new city that I'd never seen before, and was excited, but also relaxed, because the context was so familiar. I was used to jetting off to new cities to interview new people for stories I was preparing. It was normal, matter-of-fact, as real and as predictable as a ray of sunshine after a bad storm. The sunlight was streaming through the windows of the plane, bathing my face with its warmth and lulling me into a dreamlike state. I was still aware of my surroundings, but found myself floating in the clouds outside the plane.

I was in the air, floating down through a blue sky toward the fluffy white clouds that waited below like cotton balls in a giant's cosmetics case; as I imagined myself drifting down through the cool air, I suddenly realized that this was how Lona had died. She too had been enjoying herself in free-fall, but had suddenly seen Kelleher's parachute blossom like a deadly flower in her face, had become entangled in his lines, and had plummeted to the ground. All of a sudden, my fantasy seemed more terrifying than euphoric, and I reached over and pulled down the shade, wanting to forget where I was and how similar Lona's death was to my daydream.

I closed my eyes again, and though the shade was not drawn, was surprised to see a beautiful array of colored lights bubbling and swarming in front of my eyes. The colors were a painter's fantasy, a never-ending transformation of pinks and blues into browns and ivory. The colors changed incessantly, like chameleons undergoing an identity crisis. I watched, amazed, as they grew more and more bright,

began to take on vaguely geometric forms, and I started in my seat when they were suddenly replaced with my familiar green and blue friends from my earlier experiences; the green and blue lights mated with one another like partners of two different species, merging, melting into one another, reforming, dissolving, and dying away, then reappearing before my mesmerized eyes.

"You seem to get around," I remarked, for the first time clearly associating these lights with Lona's presence. In the past, the lights had always appeared when I thought of her, and now the process was working the other way around; when I saw the lights behind my closed eyelids, I automatically, instinctively, thought of her.

I was immediately filled with a strong chill.

Susan flipped through a magazine by my side, but it was nice to have this extra, inner company. I remarked to my lights that they must feel at home in a plane, and there was another faint response, a chill that began in my toes and slowly worked its way up to my head, like a small breaker sliding over the shores of my senses.

I thought about Lona outside the plane, plummeting down toward the ground, and found it possible now to imagine the thrill that must be involved in skydiving - the earth spread out before one's gaze like an immense patchwork quilt, the clouds flying by like swatches of a dream, the air silent and crisp with blueness.

"It must be beautiful," I observed, and the chills returned.

I felt like someone who has invited guests to his home and finds them so agreeable that he invites them to stay; but the sensations were more reassuring than exciting. I found myself being lulled into a pleasant, warm sleep and allowed myself to drift along the tropic river.

When I awoke a few miles north of Columbia, it seemed that I might easily have imagined the entire experience. The impressions had been so delicate, so tender, that even when they were most vivid, I was being anesthetized, convinced of the unreality of them. I got off the plane thinking that it had been a beautiful and particularly compelling daydream, but a dream none the less.

If Lona still existed in some unexplained fashion, I was sure that she had no desire to visit Columbia, South Carolina. It might well be a beautiful city, I thought, but ghosts were supposed to stay near the scene of their death, or to linger around those they loved. I could imagine Lona stopping by my home on occasion in order to look in on her daughters, but couldn't believe that she cared enough about me to make an eighteen-hundred-mile trip. I was convinced that if there was such a thing as a spirit with Lona's name tag on it, I'd left it safely behind in Massachusetts.

I hoped that Julie wouldn't have any unpleasant encounters with it while I was gone, but secretly savored the notion of at least being on my own - no kids, no wife, no spirits of ex-wives to plague my steps, to monitor my moves, to tell me what they needed when all I needed was a good rest.

The trip seemed to live up to my fondest expectations. Susan and I drove on to Florence, a small,

largely rural community in the southeast part of the state where our two murderers had originally come from, and began to run down their friends and relatives and enemies, both legal and personal; we were very lucky, and found most of them anxious to talk to us about the mother and her son. The days passed by without incident, and I realized that my search for Lona was finally over. I'd returned to the heart of my existence, to the safe sanity of journalism, and felt a million times better for it. No more playing with the paranormal; now it was business as usual, and I was grateful for it.

I called Julie and the girls every other night, and everything seemed to be fine in Massachusetts as well. My grandmother was visiting at the time, and kept Julie company in the evenings after the girls were in bed; I was glad that Julie had someone to rely on in an emergency.

When I phoned on the evening of September 16, six days after I'd left, Julie was nearly hysterical. She said that for the past few days strange things had been happening in the house that she was unable to explain. She had taken a nap one afternoon, and awakened to find the bed shaking beneath her; she was petrified and afraid to move, but tried to rationalize the experience away as either a minor earth tremor or the shock of a passing truck. Then she had realized with some anguish that nothing else was vibrating. The walls and windows, the framed pictures that hung beside the bed, and the other furniture in the bedroom were all completely still; it was only the bed that was vibrating.

I immediately thought of the night that I'd lain in that bed, and been convinced that my body was vibrating, only to discover that it wasn't, that I was experiencing something that wasn't reality. It seemed that the same thing had happened to Julie, but she seemed to believe that the bed really had been shaking epileptically; she had been too terrified to move, had clutched at the bed as though she were on a raft in a storm-tossed ocean, and had finally drifted off into a fitful sleep.

Instead of reminding Julie of my own experience, I told her that I was sure that it had been a passing truck and that, because of the way the house was constructed, the bed might shake while other portions of the room remained still; it was a completely implausible explanation, but one that I hoped would reassure her.

She also noted that while we were talking on the telephone, the hair on the back of her head was standing up on end like that of a frightened cat, and that she was feeling faint chills; I suggested that she shut the windows.

I knew that Julie wasn't inventing phenomena for my entertainment. What I'd felt had frightened her to death, and she wanted absolutely no part of it. She didn't want to see it happen to me, let alone have it happen to her. If she was sensing things were out of place in her home, that somehow the psychic or emotional furniture was being arranged, I'd bet money that she was right; Julie had been an excellent reporter, and I'd never had reason to doubt her ability or her veracity. I hung up the phone, wanting to be with her, to take her in my arms and comfort her with the warmth of my body, but realized that there was still enough work to require three or four days of digging. I fell asleep, regretting for the first time that I was lying in a motel room in Florence rather than in my bedroom at home.

Julie and I loved each other deeply, and this was always apparent in moments of need. We gravitated toward each other during a crisis like a fireman gravitates toward a hose. We might not have patched

every flaw in our marriage, but the foundation was strong and deep; I had no doubts that the marriage would survive, merely wondered how many scars it would take to resolve our differences.

I drifted off into sleep quickly, easily, tired from the day's activities, and was soon engrossed in a series of lifelike dreams. Each of the dreams began in the motel room; I awoke and saw something unusual happening, was startled by it, but fell back asleep, only to awake once more and find myself confronting yet another abnormal situation. Finally, though, at about three in the morning, I really awoke, and found myself lying on my back staring at the pale-gray ceiling.

The air conditioner groaned away beneath the windows - a detail that was missing from my dreams - and in the bathroom a leaky faucet played a drum solo on the bottom of the sink. I glanced around the room, saw the furniture sitting opposite me, the lone print on the wall; everything was exactly as it had been when I'd climbed into bed.

I rolled over, clutching my pillow to my chest, and tried to go back to sleep, but found myself wide awake and still suspicious of my surroundings, as though a thief had sneaked into the room and was now waiting in the closet for me to begin snoring. I turned over, and stared at the ceiling again. The room was dark, but enough outside light seeped through the curtains for me to make out the contents of the room rather clearly; there was the television set, there the container of melting ice cubes, there the pile of South Carolina newspapers. I noted that the door was still chained, and feeling reassured, started to roll over again. As I did, I noticed the blue static electricity that had gathered above my head.

Four feet above me, a cloud of bright-blue phosphorescence was tingling with energy; it was as though someone had painted the air with black light. The light was thin, a layer of luminescence that vibrated like atomic energy at Three Mile Island. I lay on my back and studied it carefully, hoping for some clue to its meaning. It reminded me of the shimmering blue light I'd seen in the basement of my home, but this was different. Before I'd attempted to elicit the unusual, but now, here in South Carolina, I'd done my best to avoid it. I'd crammed my mind with facts and figures, times and places, charges and descriptions, so that, like a miser's piggybank, it had no room for a single penny more, and it had seemed to work. But now, when my defenses were down and I least expected it, the unusual had returned to haunt me.

I stared at the cloud as though it were the face of a bill collector; I examined it carefully, which bespoke my distaste as much as my interest. It was a remarkable phenomenon, but not all that detailed: a rather pretty blue light vibrating against the darker gray of the ceiling. I glanced around the room once more, making sure that this wasn't some light shining into the room from outside, but it wasn't; the curtains were tightly drawn, and no light leaked around their edges.

I turned back to the performance going on above me, and as I did, I suddenly saw two beams of bright white light, a light so clear and white that it seemed transparent. It was like standing in a dark barroom and having someone open the door onto the white heat of a midsummer day. I was startled by this new wrinkle in the fabric of my paranormal experiences, but immediately began to try to decipher it, to unearth its meaning. The lights were identical except for their length - both were about an inch to an inch and a half wide and ran parallel to each other at a distance of about two inches. The one at the top



of my field of vision was approximately seven inches long, and the one below it about five inches long.

The two lights seemed to exist independently and be impaled on the air just this side of the ceiling. There were no streaks or traces of light linking them to a source; they were simply there. I gazed at them for about ten seconds, long enough to convince myself that they were not a case of movement phosphene or some other natural occurrence, before they disappeared as inexplicably as they'd materialized.

I shook my head, and when I turned back to the ceiling, it was a dull, dead gray, with no lights at all playing across its surface; the experience was over, as mysterious, and possibly more mysterious, than any of its predecessors. The two bands of white light made no sense at all to me; I could not associate them with Lona or with anyone else I knew who now inhabited the spirit world, or whatever lay on the other side of death. I was reminded, however, of the similar lights that I'd seen during one of my last self-induced experiences in the basement at home. At one point, a bright white Y-shaped light had appeared above my head against a similar background; the shapes were not the same, but the color and intensity of the lights was identical, and the two stripes I'd just seen would have combined to form a Y-shape of approximately the same size.

It was as though the first lights represented some strange, unfathomable entity and these two lines the entity's individual components.

All of which made no sense at all to me. I dismissed the experience as being as empty and unreasoning as its brothers, and after letting my nerve endings settle down to a quiet background hum, went back to sleep again. I was no longer certain whether spirits were as sedentary as I imagined; it seemed that they were now in ham hocks and cornpone country.

## Chapter Fourteen

Lona was trying to tell me something about herself, I suspected, something I didn't know existed but which she was trying to let me know about so that I'd realize that some small part of her did exist. There seemed to be a force of some undisclosed nature that was guiding me to experiences which I couldn't control or predict. They happened at the least likely times, when I wasn't prepared for them and didn't want them to happen; they happened when it wasn't convenient; and they happened when it wasn't sensible, when all the circumstances seemed stacked against my being able to indulge in or use the experience.

It had come to seem that the experiences and I were working at cross-purposes, that its aims and mine were not similar, let alone identical. I wanted to write a book that would examine the subject of life after death in an evidential way, examining what proof could be gleaned from my experiences and the experiences of the mediums I'd met: but the experiences seemed contrary, as though they were intent on proving my moods were the result of an overactive imagination or of some material defect in my brain as yet undiagnosed.

I decided to let well enough alone, eventually, and tried to make the episodes go away by driving them from my mind, willing them away as one wills away warts by selling them to a friend for a penny.

But it wasn't quite that easy; it seemed that the forces involved were something other than my own, something that I couldn't control as easily as I could my thoughts and the movements of my body. They seemed to exist in a realm of their own, in a dimension that I knew nothing about and found difficult to believe, no matter how beguiling the experiences themselves were.

Something was out there, but I couldn't be sure what. Either I was mad or I was not; there was another dimension or there was not. It was time to find out.

The strain that my search had put on my marriage was tremendous; I wouldn't have been surprised if Julie had announced she was going to divorce me when this book came out. I merely wanted to expunge the ghost of my former wife, whether it was real or not, and see if I could prove that there was a hereafter in the same way as I could prove fraud or theft. But for Julie, this represented a very real threat to her marriage, which she could not easily overlook. She didn't want any more problems than we already had to contend with, and this was a problem of monumental proportions. I waited while she sifted through the debris of my research, selling me out when it came to a choice between her sensibilities and the material I was uncovering. I considered her requests and dismissed them. It was more important for me to tell the truth than it was for me to placate her. It was a painful admission to make, but my work was more important than my marriage.

I decided that I was going to go to New Jersey to find out what really happened the day that Lona died, and try to decipher the truth from the facts of that tragedy, check the information that I'd been given by the mediums and by my own experiences with the accident itself.

I thought about what Lillian, Mark, and the rest had told me and what I had felt.

I considered the blue and green lights that had been plaguing me and the way my body would wrench into a sitting, nearly fetal, position during my basement sessions and I remembered the depression I had felt on the top of my head. I recalled Lillian's description of a bruise on the shoulder and marks on the abdomen. And I remembered the seemingly contradictory portrait of trees and plains that Mark had painted.

If any of these things matched up with the facts that the police and coroner had in their possession, then something was real.

At the end of September, I went to my parents' home in New Jersey. We chatted for a few hours that evening, skirted a discussion of what I was doing, and caught up on each other's lives before I went to bed. I fully expected to sleep through until morning, because my parents' house was a place of peace and quiet, a place where I'd always been able to relax during the most unpleasant moments of my life. I suspected that to feel that we are safe and secure from all of night's mysteries and tragedies, we need to know no more than that our parents are nearby and ready to protect us from everything, including lights in the dark.

I went to the bathroom on my way to my old bedroom and found that the room hadn't changed much. The rest of the house was a chameleon, constantly shifting its colors and designs - the most recent incarnation was Mexican, the result of my parents' annual trips to Acapulco - but the bathroom had been untouched by the fiesta in the rest of the house. Here nothing was out of place, nothing out of the ordinary; it was exactly as it had always been: the sink opposite the toilet; the shower tucked away behind a sliding door. It wasn't the most conducive setting for thinking about Lona, but as I sat there, studying my reflection in the mirror, I found that my thoughts were returning to her once more.

I wished that she were here with me. We'd had a lot of good moments here, and it wasn't as though we'd ever played with each other in the tiled confines of the bathroom, but now that I was alone and my parents were in bed, I found that the sensations I'd experienced while watching the Carson show in my living room were blossoming again in my loins.

I made my way into my bedroom, anxious for the peace of sleep. But I was fitful, worried about what I would have to confront the next day. Not only would there be the ultimate revelation of whether I had gone off the deep end or not, but also there would be sheer unpleasantness. I had seen photos of people marred and dead; I had seen the bodies of the abused in the flesh. I hadn't enjoyed it when the people were strangers, and the idea of seeing the final damage to someone I had loved was beginning to hit me.

Tomorrow I was going to have to confront her death more squarely than I ever had before. I was going to speak with Detective Charles Craig, the Burlington County detective who had investigated the deaths, and with Dr. Joseph M. DiLorenzo, the Chief Medical Examiner for Burlington County.

I had no desire to learn the intimate details of Lona's death and her disemboweling beneath the pathologist's scalpel, but didn't see how I could avoid it. The only way I could discover whether or not the information I'd received in a rather unorthodox fashion was accurate was to talk to these two men

of science, the one a master of solving crimes, the other a doctor who knew the human body as I knew sentences and words.

Yet their words would be the least of it. It was the autopsy photographs I feared. I had no wish to confront any more ugliness than I had to in life and decided that I wouldn't look at the pictures. I'd listen to Dr. DiLorenzo's description of the trauma and his analysis of what had most likely happened.

I needed to know what had happened to her body, what had been found at the scene of the accident, how the bodies were positioned, and what these things indicated about how the accident had happened.

It was the most perplexing incident I'd ever investigated. The accidents I'd seen as a newspaper reporter always had a clean-cut cause and effect, such as, the driver approaching from the left had failed to yield the right-of-way to the oncoming vehicle, which had hit him broadside while making a right-hand turn. There were no road maps for this one; the only two people who knew what had actually happened were Lona and Kelleher, and neither of them had lived to tell the tale.

I tried to sleep once more, tried to borrow a few tricks from my traffic with the paranormal and blank out my mind in such a way as to make sleep possible, but the images I expected to encounter the next day kept floating into the black pools of my subconscious like dead leaves drifting on a winter pond.

## Chapter Fifteen

It was the first time in my life that I was going to regret being a journalist. I was going to have to ask Dr. DiLorenzo questions that I didn't want to ask; he, in turn, was going to tell me things that I didn't want to hear about the way in which Lona had died. I was going to have to listen to Ms explanation of the accident and try to listen as though I were a dispassionate reporter listening to the facts about someone else's tragedy.

I could hardly bring myself to go to the Rancocas Valley Regional Hospital in Willingboro, which was where the bodies had been brought after the double fatality and where the autopsies had been performed the following day. I was not sure that I wanted to be where the final experiences relating to Lona's life as well as her death had occurred.

I was tempted to turn my father's car around, but instead told myself that I was doing what must be done. I was doing what I had to do, both for myself, and as a professional; I was trying to exorcise the unpleasant, unfinished matter of my relationship to Lona, but also was researching a book. It wasn't the easiest thing to do, but I knew that, like a visit to the dentist, it was something that had to be done.

Dr. DiLorenzo was waiting for me when I arrived at his office. He was a short, stocky man with dark hair and a pleasant smile, who seemed anxious to talk with me about his profession. Before I could even ask my first question, he had gotten up from behind his desk and pulled out an album of photographs of fatal accidents. He flipped the album open to a page and handed it to me. I wasn't prepared for this unexpected confrontation, but knew that this was part of what I had come here for.

I hadn't told the doctor that I had been Lona's husband and didn't want to bring the matter up at this point, so I was now forced to act as though the picture in front of me was that of a stranger. I glanced down, and found myself looking at the face of a woman I had loved. Lona was wearing a red helmet with "Lona" painted on it; her eyes were open slightly, the right one looking up toward the top of her head, while the left eye seemed to be squinting.

I didn't recognize the expression then, but it was one that I had felt during my experiments with altered states of consciousness; when I reviewed my notes, I found repeated references to my eyes squinting and rolling up to the top of my head.

The photograph showed no major injuries. There was only a small cut on her upper lip and a slight bruise above her left eye.

The left eye! All of a sudden, I remembered the pains in that region during my basement sessions. Of course. I was beginning to feel numb.

I stared at her dead face, trying to imagine her as she had been when she was alive, but found it impossible. I had a feeling that I was looking at a body that no longer meant anything. It was as though Lona had left the shell of her body and was no longer in residence.

The doctor sat down at his desk as I turned the page, only to find the bloody face of Richard Kelleher

staring up at me. It was obvious that his injuries had been more visible to the naked eye than Lona's had. I wanted to shut the book, but felt obliged to look at the photograph for a few more minutes. I opened my notebook and jotted down a few details about Kelleher's appearance.

I asked the doctor to go through the autopsy reports and to tell me as clearly as he could what they indicated. The medical terminology had left me wondering what had really happened, and I hoped that DiLorenzo would be able to explain what had happened in a layman's terms.

DiLorenzo opened the file on top of his desk. It was Lona's.

"This is the report for a Lona Puskas," he said, mispronouncing the last name. "She was the young woman who was killed in the double fatality. I think she is the one whose parachute failed to open."

I was trying to take notes as well as tape record what the doctor was saying, but found it impossible to concentrate. I was obliged to let my mind go blank, to listen to the doctor without responding to what he was telling me. He was saying that Lona had been injured "in extremis," that her injuries were so extensive she could have died from any one of three: a broken neck, a fractured spine, or a ruptured heart. His own opinion was that she had been killed by the first.

I asked him whether or not Lona Puskas had died before she had struck the ground.

"I think she was probably unconscious when she hit," DiLorenzo told me. "When a person is strangled in this way, they generally lose consciousness within a matter of seconds. The hyoid bone was compressed in such a way that it would have been impossible for her to breathe."

I was grateful to hear that Lona had been unconscious after Kelleher's lines had wrapped around her throat. The idea that she had been conscious of what was happening as the two of them had fallen toward the earth was a very disconcerting one. I'd been told that Kelleher had apparently remained conscious until the instant that he had struck the ground.

The doctor indicated that he thought that Kelleher had undoubtedly been alive when he hit - he had been breathing when a witness to the accident had arrived on the scene and had apparently remained conscious until he expired a minute or two later. I remembered the look on Kelleher's face; it was as though he had seen death coming; his face was contorted with fear.

I wanted to cut the interview short, but asked Di-Lorenzo to show me the room where the autopsies had been performed; he was happy to have the chance to show off his hospital's facilities. He took me down a corridor, unlocked a door, and took me into a small room, which was filled with refrigerated units in which bodies were kept

The adjoining room was where the autopsies actually took place. This was where Lona's body had lain that morning more than three years previously when this man had opened it and had attempted to pinpoint the cause of her death. It was like reliving a bad dream. I felt as though I was trespassing in someone else's most intimate experience; I had known Lona in life, and now I was getting to know her in death.

That night I went to see Detective Charles Craig. I went to his home at about seven o'clock and found him waiting for me with a thick folder of documents. He'd assembled documents from his files and the photographs that had been taken at the scene of the accident. I had no idea that the slides he had in three boxes were of Lona's and Kelleher's autopsies and might have thought twice about sitting down with him if I had known.

Detective Craig was a pleasant, hard-nosed detective with shocks of white hair, which had earned him the nickname Silver Fox. I studied him carefully and conceded a slight resemblance to Charlie Rich, the country and western singer.

I told him that since Lona's death some paranormal experiences had occurred to people involved with her and explained that I was trying to find out whether or not there was anything to them. He respected my decision not to name names, but I indicated that one of the people involved was the victim's first husband. I didn't mention, however, that I was that person; I thought it would make matters much simpler if I wasn't known to be involved in a personal way.

Detective Craig told me what he remembered of the accident, and I asked him questions whenever his account began to drag. He explained that after the double fatality he had gone out to the scene of the accident and had found the two jumpers lying in a newly plowed field approximately a hundred and sixty-five yards from Arc Road. The bodies were lying approximately a hundred and forty-five yards from a line of trees and were nearly side by side. He said he wasn't sure whether the parachutes were covering the bodies or were lying beside them. It seemed that Lona had landed in a seated position, but that Kelleher had fallen in a prone position; she was at his feet and facing away from him.

She had landed in a seated position, the same position as I found myself falling into automatically during my basement sessions. The pieces of the psychic puzzle were falling together, but I was beginning to short-circuit.

Detective Craig flipped through his files as he recalled the events of that day, and I asked him if it was possible to obtain a copy of his official report. He told me that he doubted there would be a problem, but would have to get clearance from the prosecutor's office; I offered to stop off at his office the following day.

I wanted to know more about the parachutes themselves, but Craig could tell me only that they were Strado Clouds, which were what Elek's firm manufactured; Lona's had had a white canopy with yellow panels.

I asked about Kelleher's 'chute, but Craig knew only that it had deployed, had flown into Lona's face, and had apparently made it impossible for her to reach for her ripcord. I wanted to know more, but Detective Craig, like myself, had had no eyewitness of that scene to talk to. He'd interviewed the other jumpers and had spoken to eyewitnesses on the ground, but no one knew exactly what had happened. It was as though the accident had occurred in a vacuum. I couldn't believe that this was all there was to know.

I opened the envelope with the black-and-white photographs in it and was surprised to find that I could view them dispassionately. I managed to keep my emotional responses locked inside me. The photographs were disgusting because of the bizarre contortions of the bodies. Lona was slumped forward, her neck elongated by the force of the impact, and Kelleher looked as though he had landed head first. He was sprawled on his right side with blood streaming from his ears, nose, and mouth.

I couldn't bring myself to study the photos, but flipped through them idly, as though I was looking at photographs of homes for sale. It was the most uncomfortable task I'd ever had. This was how she had died.

She had fallen to the earth from a distance of 10,000 feet and had landed on her backside in a field of soybeans.

I set the envelope aside and took out the first box of slides. As soon as I slid the little drawer open, I realized that it was a mistake. The first photograph I saw was an autopsy shot taken from an angle beneath her feet. It showed that her right foot had broken off at the ankle; the foot was attached to the leg by a short length of skin, but otherwise was separated from the body. It was the most terrifying slide I'd ever seen.

I was not prepared for this at all. I'd assumed that the few photographs I'd seen at the Chief Medical Examiner's earlier that day were the only ones taken at the autopsy. Now I discovered that the police had kept custody of all of the evidence in the case, which meant that there was more unpleasantness than I'd bargained for when I'd come to Detective Craig's apartment. I flipped through them quickly, not daring to spend too much time on them.

I'd never before had to try so hard to remain a professional. I gritted my teeth and went through the three boxes of transparencies. Two were of Kelleher. I was grateful for that.

Craig sat across from me, staring at my face as though he wondered when I was going to be sick. I was certain that he'd shown similar photos to acquaintances, who had gone green or sprinted for the bathroom; but somehow I managed to keep my cool facade.

I went back to my parents' home and crawled into bed. All of a sudden, I saw in my mind Lona's ripped ankle and remembered my own crippled foot, the one I had hobbled on for months. It was my left foot, but the similarity was so striking that I could not consider explanations.

Kelleher's face floated in front of me, and Lillian's description right behind.

"I don't feel that he died an easy death, okay. I feel that some member of your family or somebody very, very close to you was there. And I'm going to say I get his head, and it's a very, very swollen type thing .... I don't like the way that he died." Nor had Lillian liked the way he had lived. "I feel at one particular time that he was in the service. ... I feel that he was a lost person and I'm going to say chemicals in some way. Whether he took tranquilizers, drugs, or drank I really can't tell you, but he's on the other side of life. And they're showing me this American flag."



All of a sudden, the obituaries flooded back, and I recalled that Kelleher had been a Vietnam veteran. The next morning I would make some calls to some of his jumping contemporaries. I'd find out that he was known as Crazy Rich and had been a frequent drug user, although without a trace of drugs in his system on the day of the accident.

I lay on the bed, looking up at the ceiling, and found that colored lights were beginning to form in front of my eyes. I wasn't particularly anxious to indulge in the activity at the moment, but knew that I was going to do so. I was going to let happen what was going to happen. It didn't matter how tired I was or how much I wanted to forget the events of the day; the only thing that mattered was that I allow Lona to make contact with me once more.

It seemed that fifteen or twenty minutes elapsed. I got up to go to the bathroom, but when I returned, the lights continued to form above my head. They were blue and green and other colors. Blue and green were the colors I had come to associate with Lona's presence. Ever since my first contact with her spirit, I had seen those colors.

Finally, after what seemed like half an hour, something unexpected happened. Suddenly I found myself looking at what seemed to be a slide showing the back of Lona's head. She was lying face down, her hair pulled up to show her neck, and I realized that her hands were tied together, their fingers intertwined, behind her neck. The image lasted for about ten to fifteen seconds, and I found I was able to focus on it. I had no doubt that I was looking at something that was there, something that existed, but I didn't understand why Lona's hands would be in that position.

After a few more seconds, the image disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. The room was dark, and no other lights seemed to be gathering. I rolled over and tried to go to sleep, but as I lay there, I tried to find some meaning in the image I'd just seen. It was as though Lona had been trying to tell me something, but at that time her message escaped me.

The next morning, while I was sitting at the breakfast table, I suddenly thought what the message might be. I remembered that Lona had been strangled, and I wondered whether or not she had tried to free the lines from her throat. It seemed a reasonable hypothesis. If a person was being strangled, it would seem perfectly natural to try to pull the lines away from her throat. It had never occurred to me that that might have been the case with Lona. I couldn't wait to phone Dr. Di-Lorenzo to ask him whether or not my guess was accurate.

A few minutes later, I called him at his office and asked him about this unexplored detail.

"If Mrs. Puskas was being strangled, what would her first instinctive reaction have been?" I asked

The doctor seemed to be thinking about that, but after a moment of silence, he told me, "She would probably have tried to pull the ropes off of her neck."

It was exactly as I had seen it the night before. Lona's hands had been wrapped around the lines that were strangling her; she was trying to free herself from the "ropes" that were killing her. I couldn't believe that I hadn't thought of it before, but knew now why "ropes" had been so significant in all the

readings with the mediums. I thanked the doctor for his help and hung up the phone.

I was amazed that I had seen a vision that told me the truth about a detail of Lona's death which I'd never stopped to consider. It seemed that Lona was attempting to tell me as much about her accident as she could, and I was able to document the information I was receiving. Something else I'd experienced had turned out to have a basis in fact.

Later that morning, I drove back to Mount Holly to go over the police reports in the office of Detective Craig; he was on vacation, but met me there and arranged for me to use his office. I sat down with the file and with the photographs and slides; I'd seen them briefly the night before when I'd stopped by Craig's apartment, but this was to be the first and last time that I'd look at them at length.

The file was lengthy, containing police reports as well as statements from all the participants and from several eyewitnesses. One of them had arrived on the scene shortly after the accident and described finding Lona with Kelleher's lines wrapped around her throat. He had cut the lines in order to check her pulse, but when he found none, had gone to Kelleher's aid. Kelleher had died before he could be helped, however.

The police reports contained the material I needed, but were too voluminous to copy down in longhand. Instead I turned on my tape recorder and read the reports and statements. It seemed the quickest and most accurate method to use in order to obtain all the details I needed. I talked for nearly three hours, documenting every facet of the accident and its aftermath. Only when I had dictated every report in the file did I dare to open the envelope containing the slides and photographs.

I took out the black-and-white photographs first. They were less disturbing because they showed the accident scene but didn't show any close-ups of Lona's face. She was dressed in a jump suit, helmet, and goggles. It was impossible to see her face clearly, but I still found myself growing upset. She had landed in a sitting position in a plowed field, with her knees flexed and her head resting on them.

I recalled that Mark and Lillian had spoken about seeing Lona falling near some trees, and Mark also said something about an open field. Both were there in front of me. The bodies lay about a hundred and fifty yards from a line of trees, which bordered the field. They hadn't known anything at all about Lona or about her death, but they had accurately described the site of the accident. It was impossible, but they had managed to do it. I found it difficult to believe, but the evidence was sitting in my lap.

I wanted to take the photographs with me, but knew that they were police evidence. Craig had arranged for me to obtain Xerox copies of them, though, and a secretary was kind enough to run off copies of the ones I wanted.

The slides were the only remaining piece of evidence that I had to go through. I opened the boxes reluctantly, setting them on Detective Craig's desk and holding them up to the overhead light one by one. The first two boxes contained slides of Kelleher's autopsy, and I looked at them indifferently. I had never met Kelleher, and in fact had never even heard of him before the accident, so it was easy to treat him as I would the victim of any fatal accident. The next box was another matter. It contained slides of Lona's autopsy.

The slides would show me all there was to know about her death. It was something I had to do, but something I was loath to do. I could only take so much. I looked at each slide as though it were the only one I was going to have to examine. I tried to think to myself that this wasn't Lona, but only a memento of the life that we had shared. I noticed the stretch marks, which had been on her body since she had carried the children. I suddenly remembered something else that Lillian had said.

"There was a mark, I'm seeing a mark or a scar, I'm not sure which, on the lower abdomen. It was a mark or something which you would have referred to in a light manner, something you would have mentioned in a moment of lightness. I don't want to say love-making, but in a moment of lightness you would have noticed it and made mention of it."

I hadn't thought about Lona's stretch marks since the last time I'd seen them. They were the sort of thing that soon slipped from one's memory. I realized, though, that Lillian had once more been accurate. Lona and I had joked about the marks, referring to them as the proof of our love for each other.

I took the next slide and held it up to the light; it was of Lona's face. I turned away for a second, but knew that I was going to have to examine the slide more closely. I looked again and realized that the expression on her face was one I knew. It was the expression I'd worn each time I'd attempted to communicate with Lona's spirit. I'd always thought that those strange facial contortions were simply a by-product of the altered state of consciousness, but now I recognized them in Lona's dead face. I had seen her face as it had been after the accident with my own.

I looked at the slide for a while, then set it aside, taking up the next one. It was a photograph of Lona's heart lying in DiLorenzo's hand. The image brought to mind the comments about a problem in the chest area that all the mediums had made. They had also all called attention to a problem in the area of the neck. I couldn't believe that they had been correct on every count.

The final slide in the pile was one I hadn't noticed the night before. It was of Lona on the stainless-steel table I had seen the day before in the autopsy room at the hospital. I couldn't believe what I saw.

There was a large, distinct bruise on Lona's upper arm, as close to the shoulder as the foot to the toe.

"I don't know if you know of this," Lillian had said. "But I'm getting a bruise or a mark of some kind on the shoulder. I see a fall, and there's this bruise or mark of some kind."

It hadn't made any sense to me at the time or to Elek or to Dr. DiLorenzo. There was no mention of it in the autopsy report, and the day before, I had specifically asked the coroner about it.

"If there was a bruise on the arm, given the nature of the injuries, would you bother mentioning it in the autopsy report?" I had asked.

"Normally I would," he had told me.

But there had been no mention of the bruise in the autopsy report, and here it was on the slide.

I sat, stunned, in the office as the darkness began to fall. It was late - I could hear other people in the building leaving for the day - and my tea had gone cold. I got up to leave and realized that there was still one more slide left.

She was on the autopsy table before the procedure had started. She was still in the jump suit, which I had never really noticed before. The jump suit was blue with green racing stripes on the side, exactly the green and blue that had been swimming past my eyes since the day the chills had first started.

I was ready to go home.

It had been an extraordinary journey through an inner world. I felt like a long-distance swimmer who has finally made it to shore, exhausted, but at the same time exhilarated. I had done things that I'd never done before, had seen new landscapes in a new world, and had come back to describe the trip for others.

It hadn't been the easiest task in my life. There had been many moments when I would have been happy to abandon the project, but at a certain point it had assumed a life of its own.

It nearly seemed that the book had written me, rather than the other way around.

Lona had survived. She was alive and well and able to communicate.

But now it was time to go.

Each time I left my grandmother after visiting, I'd say, "Good-bye," and she'd correct me.

"Don't say good-bye," she'd tell me. "Good-bye means I'm never going to see you again. Say 'so long.' That means we'll see each other again."