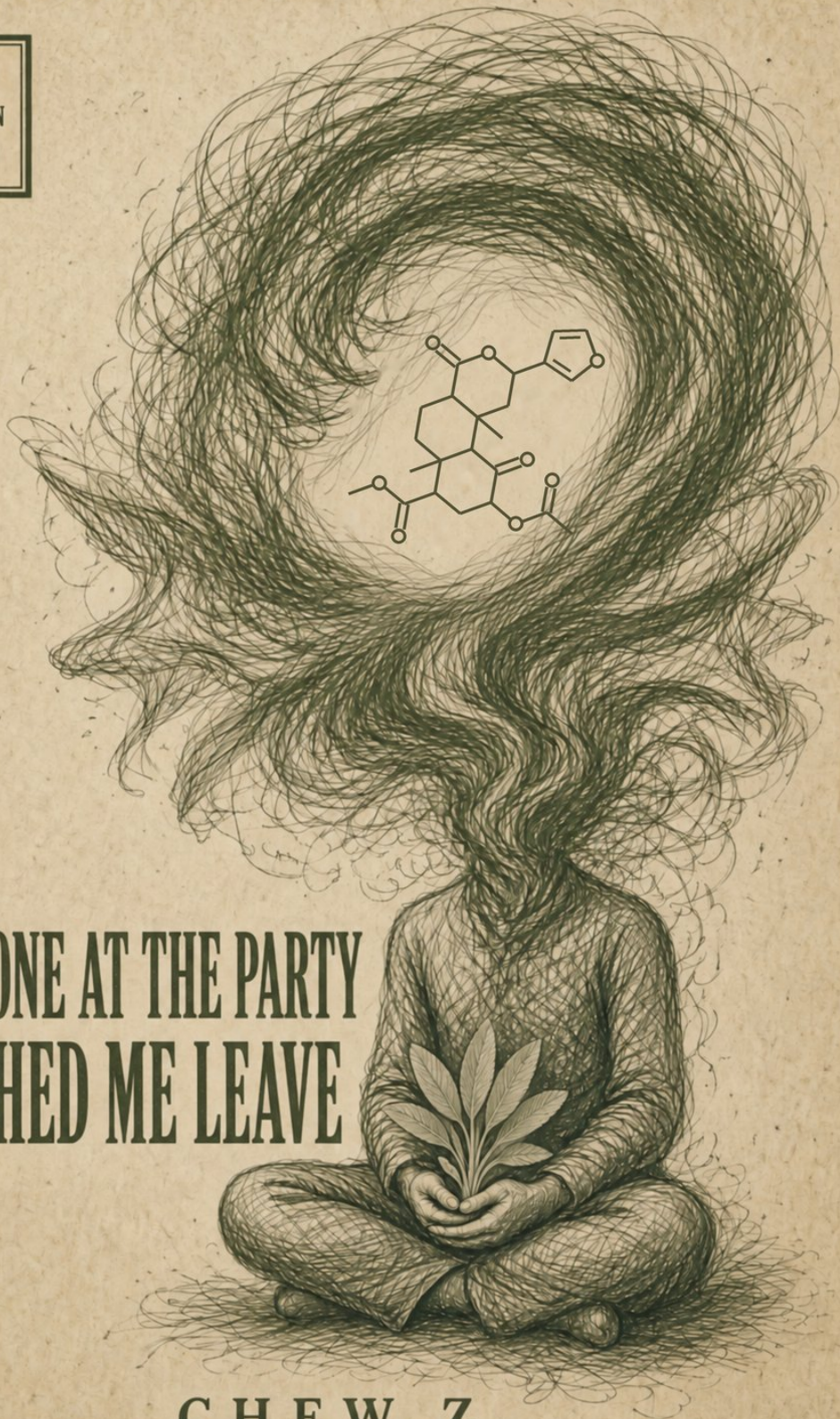


ROYA
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No. 100

EVERYONE AT THE PARTY WATCHED ME LEAVE

C H E W Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION



EVERYONE AT THE PARTY WATCHED ME LEAVE

CHEW Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 100

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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SIERRA MAZAT

HERE BE

THE SHEPHERDESS





HERE BE DELOS

On the oldest maps, the edge of the known world was marked with a warning. Where the mapmakers had been, they drew coastlines and rivers and towns. Where they had not been, they wrote a few words in Latin: *hic sunt leones* [HEEK soont lay-OH-nays], *here are lions*. On one small copper globe, made around the year 1510, somebody wrote something stranger along the far coast of Asia: *hic sunt dracones* [HEEK soont drah-KOH-nays], *here are dragons*. It is almost the only place in the world those words have ever been found. The famous English saying, *here be dragons*, grew out of them later. *Here be* is simply an old way of saying *here are*.

These books keep the mapmaker's warning and change the creature.

Delos [DEE-los] is a Greek word. It means *clear, visible, plain to see*. It is also the second half of a word you know. In 1956 a British psychiatrist named Humphry Osmond needed a name for a family of substances that change the mind, and he built one out of two Greek words: *psyche* [SY-kee], the mind or soul, and *delos*, made visible. *Psychedelic. Mind-manifesting*. Not a poison and not an escape, he meant, but something that shows the mind to itself.

And Delos is an island.

The old Greek story says that the goddess Leto was going to have a child by Zeus, the king of the gods, and that Zeus's wife, Hera, in her fury, forbade every land on earth to give Leto a place to give birth. Every land was afraid, and every land said no. But there was one place that did not count as land. It was a small island that had once been Leto's own sister, who had leapt from the sky into the sea like a falling star, and it had been drifting ever since, loose on the water, fixed to nothing, and so hard to see that nobody could find it. Because it was not fixed to the earth, Hera's command could not reach it. It took Leto in.

There, on the drifting island, in hiding, she gave birth to Apollo, the god of light.

And the island stopped drifting. The poets say that four great pillars rose up out of the sea floor and held it still. A Greek poet named Callimachus [kuh-LIM-uh-kus], writing more than two thousand years ago, tells us why it got its name: because it no longer drifted unseen on the water, but had put down roots in the middle of the sea. The sailors called it *Delos*. *The one that can be seen*.

Hidden first. Then fixed, and seen.

That is what every book in this series does. Each one follows a single person, and a single substance from somewhere in the world, a leaf, a seed, a root, a mushroom, a molecule, that moves through that person's life without a name, drifting, hidden, doing its work in the dark. And then, when the story has earned it, it is named. It stops drifting. And the book tells you everything about it: where it grows, who found it, what its names mean, what it does to the brain, what it has been used for, and what it costs.

Inside the book is a map of the world. It begins as scribble. This book fixes the first place on it.

Here be Delos. Here is the place made visible.

SYNOPSIS

It is a Saturday night in April 2007, and Tomás is twenty years old, sitting on the carpet of a fraternity-house bedroom in Los Angeles with his back against the bed, waiting to leave.

For two years he has felt nothing. A doctor gave it a name and a prescription; the pills made the flatness quieter, but it is still there, like living behind a window. So when his friend Danny holds up a small printed bag from a smoke shop on the boulevard and asks who will try what is inside it, on camera, at the party, Tomás says yes. People say it takes the mind to the strangest place it can go. If even that cannot reach him, he will know.

He spends the week reading about it in the dark and makes Danny promise to stay sober and hold the camera. He is careful not to learn its name. He wants to be surprised.

The camera's counter begins at zero. The last thing Tomás sees before the room folds shut is the small red light on the front of it.

What he finds on the other side is a dirt floor, a tin roof in the rain, and a barefoot boy of seven, counting leaves in the dark, who has been waiting for him for a very long time.

The boy has lost something. He needs help to find it.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This book begins with Terence McKenna. I never met him. I heard him, the way most people did, as a voice on a recording, and what stayed with me was not any one of his ideas but the way he said them. He could take an experience that most of his listeners had never had, and that the people who had had it swore could not be put into words, and he would put it into words — plain ones, funny ones, exact ones — until a stranger could stand inside it. He treated language as the one instrument we have for carrying something back from a place nobody else can visit. I have tried to hold these pages to that. Where the experience cannot be described, I have tried to describe it anyway, honestly, and to say where the words run out. This book is dedicated to him, and to the power of words to describe the indescribable.

The title of this series comes from a map and an island, and the page before this one tells the story. What the island means to me is simple. We all carry places we have stopped looking at: rooms we have closed, people we have not mourned. They drift out there, unseen. Now and then something makes one of them visible, and fixes it, and we have to decide whether to look.

I chose this leaf first because it is, for its size, the strangest door I know of, and because it belongs to a living people who have kept it, carefully and by hand, for longer than anyone can say. The Mazatec of Oaxaca did not invent it for parties, and this book is not a guide to taking it. The people and the story are invented. The plant, its history, its science and its dangers are as true as I could make them, checked against the people who studied it most closely, who are named at the back.

There is a word in this book, *susto*, that names a kind of grief. Tomás learns it from a child. I learned it late, too.

Chew Z

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I. THE DARE

Minute 0:00. It is Sunday morning, and Danny's camera is on my knees.

He left it outside my door before he went to breakfast, with a note on a paper towel that says *you should see this*. I have made coffee I have not drunk. I have folded out the little screen on the side of the camera and pressed play, and a counter has appeared in the corner, white numbers on black: zero minutes, zero seconds.

On the screen is a room, and in the room is me. The tape runs for thirty-four minutes. I am going to watch all of it, and while I watch, I am going to tell you where I really was, because the tape cannot. I will use the counter to tell you where we are. Every time the story moves, I will tell you what it says.

Here is where the tape begins.

It was a Saturday night in April 2007, and I was twenty years old, and I was sitting on the carpet in Danny Reyes's bedroom on the second floor of a fraternity house, with my back against his bed, waiting to leave.

That is the plainest way I know to begin, so I will begin there, and I will go slowly, because the rest of this is not plain at all, and you will need something to stand on.

Danny had just switched on the camera. It was a small silver video camera, the size of a paperback, and he had set it on his desk on top of two chemistry textbooks so that it would be level with my face. On the front of it there was a red light. When he pressed the button, the numbers began to move. One second. Two.

I did not know it then, but that counter was going to be the only thing I could trust for the next half hour.

Minute 0:20. Below us the party was loud. You could feel it more than hear it: the bass coming up through the floor into the carpet and into the bones of my hands. Someone downstairs was shouting a name over and over, happily. A girl was laughing on the landing. The house smelled of spilled beer, cheap cologne and the pizza boxes stacked by the front door since Thursday.

Danny's room was the room of a boy who had moved out of his parents' house eighteen months before and had not yet understood

that nobody else was going to clean it. A futon with a broken leg, propped on a dictionary. A poster of a band he had stopped liking. A small refrigerator humming in the corner. On the desk, beside the camera, a glass pipe, a yellow plastic lighter, and a small printed bag, folded over at the top, about the size of a packet of sugar.

I had not looked at the bag. I want you to know that. I had made a point of not looking at it.

Minute 0:45. Here is how I came to be on the floor.

On Monday night, five days before, Danny had carried his laptop into the kitchen of the house, where ten or twelve of us were eating cereal for dinner, and said, "You have to see this."

On the screen was a video, a few minutes long, the kind that people were passing around that spring. A young man in a dormitory room, sitting in a desk chair. Someone off camera handed him a glass pipe. He breathed in from it, handed it back, and looked at the wall.

For a few seconds nothing happened. Then his face changed. I don't know how else to say it. It was as if the person who lived behind his face had stepped out of the room and left the lights on. He stared at the wall. He began to laugh, not at anything, just laughing, and then he slid slowly sideways out of the chair, onto the floor, and lay there talking to the carpet in a soft, reasonable voice, as if he were explaining something important to it.

The kitchen howled. Somebody spat cereal. Danny played it twice more.

Then he said that he had the stuff. That was the word he used: *the stuff*. He had bought it that afternoon, he said, at a smoke shop on the boulevard, over the counter, perfectly legal, twenty-five dollars. He wanted to film one of us doing it at the party on Saturday. He had a new camera and he wanted a reason to use it.

"Who's in?" he said.

Nobody said anything. Then everyone looked at me, because I was the one who never did anything, and they were waiting for me to say no so they could laugh at that instead.

I said yes.

Minute 1:10. I should tell you why, and I should tell you the true reason, not the one I gave in the kitchen.

In the kitchen I said, "Somebody has to be the scientist." That got a laugh. It was the kind of thing I was known for saying.

The true reason is that for two years I had not felt anything.

I don't mean I was sad. Sad is a feeling. I mean that the world had gone flat, the way a soda goes flat, still the same color, still the same shape, but with nothing moving inside it. I went to class. I got good grades. I laughed at the right times. I could tell you exactly what a joke was supposed to feel like, the way you can describe the taste of a food you ate once as a child. But I could not taste it. It was like living behind a window. Everything was there. I could see all of it. I could not touch any of it.

In the autumn of my first year I had gone to the student health center and sat in a small room with a kind doctor who asked me questions from a sheet of paper, and at the end of the sheet she had a word for it. The word was *depression*. She gave me a prescription. The pills made the window quieter. They did not open it.

So when Danny said that this was the strangest thing a human mind could do, and that people came back from it unable to say where they had been, I thought: good. Show me somewhere strange enough, and I will know whether there is anyone left in here to be surprised.

That is what I mean when I say I came to the party for the strangeness. I was not looking for fun. I was looking for proof.

Minute 1:40. For the rest of that week, at night, after my roommate was asleep, I read about it.

I read on forums where strangers wrote long reports of what had happened to them, under names like *Nightwalker* and *DeepBlue*, with dates at the top and times written down to the minute. I read them the way some people read ghost stories: in the dark, with the covers up, a little ashamed of how much I wanted to believe them.

I learned that these people had their own way of saying how strong something had been. They used plus signs. One plus meant *I could tell it was working, but I couldn't tell you how*. Two plus meant *I*

knew exactly what it was doing, and I could still choose what to do about it. Three plus meant I could not ignore it any more; it was the only thing happening. And four plus, which almost nobody claimed, meant something that could not be described at all, a place you might go once in your life and never find again. The scale, somebody wrote, had been made up by a chemist in California who had spent his life trying to write down things that could not be written down. I liked him for that.

I started a notebook. On the first page I wrote *Plus four or I want a refund*, and I underlined it, because I was twenty and I thought I was funny.

Minute 2:15. There was one rule that every report repeated, whatever else it said. It was said so many times, by so many strangers who agreed on nothing else, that it began to feel like a prayer.

Have someone with you who has taken nothing. Sit down on the floor, somewhere you cannot fall. Take away anything sharp, anything glass, anything you could walk into. Because for a few minutes, the reports said, you will not know that your body exists, and your body will not know that you are gone, and it may decide to get up and go for a walk without you.

I read that sentence three times. Then I went to Danny's room at one in the morning and woke him up and made him promise: no beer on Saturday until it was over. He would stay sober. He would hold the camera. He would not let me stand up.

"You're a weird guy, Tomás," he said, with his eyes closed.

"Promise," I said.

He promised. And I will say this for Danny Reyes, who was loud and careless about nearly everything: he kept it.

Minute 2:50. There was one thing I did not read.

I did not read the name on the bag. I did not look up what the stuff was called, or what it came from, or where it grew. Every time a report used its real name, I let my eyes slide past the word, the way you look away from the last page of a mystery when you pick it up

in a shop.

I told myself it was because I wanted to be surprised. That if I knew too much about it, my own mind would do the work, and I would never know what was the stuff and what was me.

That was true. It was not the whole truth. But I did not know the whole truth yet, and neither, at this point, do you. We are going to find it out together, and I am not going to jump ahead.

Minute 3:20. While Danny fussed with the lamp, trying to get the light right, I thought about my family. I did not mean to. It happened the way it happens when you are nervous and trying to seem calm.

I thought about my mother, at home in our apartment in the east of the city, who would be asleep by now in front of the television, with her shoes still on. My mother came from a village in the mountains of Oaxaca [wah-HAH-kah], a state in the south of Mexico, a place so high that the clouds come into the houses in the morning and have to be let out again. Her people are Mazatec [MAH-zah-tek], an old people of those mountains, with their own language, older than Spanish.

I was born in that village. I lived there until I was seven, with my mother and my grandmother, in a house with a dirt floor and a blue door. Then my mother brought me north, to Los Angeles, and I never went back. When people asked me why, I said I didn't remember much about it, and I changed the subject.

I thought about my grandmother, my *abuela* [ah-BWEH-lah], who had died three years before, when I was seventeen. I had not gone to the funeral. My mother went, alone, and came back a week later and did not talk about it, and I did not ask.

And I thought, for about one second, about my father, which is about as long as I ever thought about him. My father went north to find work when I was six. He was going to get a job, save money, and send for us. For a while he called. Then he stopped calling. My mother has told me the same thing, in the same words, for thirteen years: *He left us*. He had another life somewhere. He did not want us.

I believed her. I hated him for it, in the easy, finished way you hate someone you cannot remember. I thought it was the one thing about my life that I had completely understood.

I put all of that away, the way you put things in a drawer before guests arrive, and I looked at the camera.

Minute 3:45. By now there were people in the doorway. Two of the brothers, one of them a tall boy from Sacramento whose name I have never been able to remember, and a girl in a green sweater who had followed them up the stairs to see what the noise was about. They leaned on the door frame with their drinks, grinning, the way people grin at the start of a video they have already seen the end of.

Danny had moved the lamp, the desk chair and a beer bottle out of reach. He had pushed the futon against the wall. He had cleared a space on the carpet about the size of a bathtub, and I sat in the middle of it with my back against the side of the bed and my legs crossed.

I looked into the camera, into the red light, and I said, "Plus four or I want a refund."

They laughed. Danny laughed. The girl in the green sweater said, "What does that mean?" and nobody answered her.

Danny unfolded the top of the little bag. He did not show it to me and I did not ask to see it. He did what he needed to do at the desk with his back to me, and then he knelt down on the carpet and held out the glass pipe and the yellow lighter, and said, very quietly, so the others could not hear, "I've got you, man. I'm right here."

Minute 4:10. The last thing I looked at before I breathed in was the red light on the camera.

I want to tell you exactly what happened next, second by second, as well as I can. I am going to fail. I know that now. But I am going to fail slowly and carefully, so that you can see the shape of what I am failing to describe.

I breathed in. It tasted of burnt leaves, bitter and hot, like the smoke from a garden bonfire in autumn. I handed the pipe back to

Danny. I remember that I was careful not to drop it.

For a moment, nothing. I sat there with the taste in my mouth and the music coming up through the floor and four people looking at me, and I thought: *well, that's that, then. Nothing. Of course nothing.*

Minute 4:18. Then the music went flat.

Not quieter. Flat. As if the sound had been printed onto a sheet of paper and the sheet had been laid down on the floor. I could still hear every note. But the notes no longer came from anywhere. They were just there, lying on the carpet around me, the way light lies on a floor.

Minute 4:25. The carpet under my hands began to slide to the left.

I knew it was not moving. I could see that it was not moving. But I could feel it moving, slowly and steadily, the way a train beside yours in a station seems to start moving when it is really you. I pressed my hands down harder to hold it still, and it went on sliding, politely, underneath them.

Minute 4:31. Then the edge of the room began to fold.

This is the first thing I will ask you to picture, so I will give you three ways in, and none of them is quite right.

It was like a page of a book being turned toward me, very slowly, by a hand I could not see: the far wall of Danny's bedroom lifting up off the floor at its bottom edge and curling over toward me, with the poster and the window and the door still on it.

It was like lying on your back in a swimming pool and watching the side of the pool bend over you, the way things bend when you look up at them through water.

It was like the moment in a dream when you realize the house you are standing in is also a different house, and both of them are true.

It was none of those things. It was the room, folding, with me inside it.

I tried to say *it's starting*. I heard the words come out of my mouth in the wrong order, and each word landed on the carpet, separately, like coins.

Minute 4:40. The only thing in the room that did not move was the red light on the camera.

I held on to it with my eyes. Everything else was turning over — the wall, the door, the faces in the doorway, the ceiling — like a page, like a wave, like a lid. And in the middle of all of it, one small red light, perfectly still, perfectly round, perfectly patient, the way a star is still when everything below it is weather.

I remember thinking, very clearly: *as long as I can see the red light, I am still here*.

Then the page turned over the red light too, and I was not.

II. THE WALL

Minute 4:41. On the screen on my knees, the young man on the carpet has gone quiet. His eyes are open. He is looking at nothing in particular, the way you look at a window when you are thinking about something else. His hands are flat on the carpet on either side of him. He looks calm. He looks, if anything, a little bored.

That is what the tape shows. Here is where I was.

Minute 4:44. I was flat.

I mean that exactly. I had no front and no back. I had width and I had height and that was all. I was a surface, and I was facing out into the room, and I understood, slowly and without any alarm at all, that I was the wall.

Not *in* the wall. Not *looking at* the wall. I was the wall of Danny's bedroom, the one with the window in it, and I could feel the poster taped to me like a sticking plaster, and the window set into me like a coin set into dough, and the cold of the April night pressing on my back from outside.

I want to say that this was frightening, and later it was. But in that first moment it felt as normal as having hands. Of course I was the wall. I had always been the wall. It was the rest of my life that suddenly seemed strange, all that walking around.

Minute 4:49. Here are three ways to picture it. None of them is right.

It was like the moment in a cartoon when a character is run over by a steamroller and peels himself up off the road, flat as paper, and still has his own face.

It was like being a photograph of yourself, printed on the side of a building, and knowing, from the inside of the paper, which way the wind was blowing.

It was like being very, very thin ice on a pond, with the whole of the weather on one side and the whole of the water on the other, and nothing of you in between but a single held breath.

It was none of those things. I was the wall, and the wall was comfortable, and that is the part I still cannot explain.

Minute 4:53. Then I noticed the colors.

Danny's room was painted a tired beige. In the light of his desk lamp it had always looked like the inside of an old envelope. Now the beige had come apart into its ingredients, the way white light comes apart in a prism, except that what came out of it were not the colors of a rainbow. They were the colors of things.

There was a yellow that was exactly the yellow of the plastic lighter. There was a green that was the green of a school hallway. There was a pink like the inside of a cheek. And they were not lying flat on the wall, which was me; they were moving across me in slow bands, the way the stripes move on a barber's pole, always climbing and never arriving.

The strangest thing was that I could feel the colors as temperatures. The yellow was warm, like a hand on the back of the neck. The green was cool, like a coin. The pink was the temperature of a body. I was not seeing color any more. I was being touched by it.

Minute 4:58. Then the room began to curve.

In an ordinary room, the lines are straight. The edge where the wall meets the ceiling is a straight line. The edge of the desk is a straight line. The door frame is two straight lines and a third across the top. You have never once thought about this, because straight lines are what rooms are made of.

Now every straight line in the room had begun, very slowly, to bend in the same direction, like the lines on a page when you hold the page up and curl it toward you. The ceiling bent down to meet me. The floor bent up. The two side walls leaned in from the left and the right. And all of the lines were bending around the same point, as if the whole room were being rolled up, gently, into a tube, and I was the paper at the center of the roll.

I could see the edges of the room joining up behind me, where no eyes could see, and I knew what was there as clearly as you know where your own feet are in the dark.

Minute 5:02. The room was not only curving. It was turning.

It turned the way a wheel turns: steadily, all in one direction, without any sound. The poster came round, and the door, and the desk with the red light on it, and the doorway with the three faces in it, and then the poster again. It was like sitting in the middle of a revolving door that never lets you out. It was like being the axle of a bicycle wheel and watching the spokes go past. It was like the drum of a washing machine, seen from the inside, very slowly, with the whole of Danny's room tumbling in it like laundry.

And the turning had a *pull*. That is the word every report I read that week had used, and I had not understood it until then. Something was pulling me to the left. Not a hand. Not wind. A steady, patient, enormous pull, like a current in the sea, or like the way a magnet pulls a pin across a table: not violently, but with complete certainty that the pin is going to end up where the magnet is.

Minute 5:05. On the tape, at this point, I start to laugh.

I have just watched it three times. The young man on the carpet begins to laugh, quietly at first, a little snort through the nose, and then more, and then so much that he folds forward over his own knees and his shoulders shake. The girl in the green sweater laughs too, because laughing is catching, and Danny's voice, just off the screen, says, "Dude. Dude. What's funny?"

I know what was funny. I will try to tell you, and it will not be funny when I tell it.

What was funny was that the pull was so *serious*. It was so large and so patient and so completely sure of itself, and there I was, a wall, with a poster stuck on me, being pulled. The size of the thing and the smallness of me were so far apart that the only possible answer was to laugh, the way you laugh when a very small dog barks at a very large truck.

And under the laughter, there was something else, which I did not have a word for yet. It was the feeling you get at the top of the stairs in your own house in the dark, when you reach for the last step and it is not there. A drop in the stomach. Not fear, exactly. The shape of fear, before the fear arrives.

Minute 5:09. Then the sound came apart.

I told you the music had gone flat, like a sheet of paper laid on the floor. Now the paper was being rolled up with the rest of the room, and the sound was curving too. I could hear the bass from downstairs, but it was coming from behind me and in front of me at the same moment, the way the sea sounds when you hold a shell to your ear. I could hear the girl in the green sweater laughing, but her laugh was the color pink, and it was moving across me in a band with the other colors.

And underneath all of it, a hum. One steady note, very low, like the note a refrigerator makes in an empty kitchen at night, the note you only notice when it stops. It was everywhere. It was the sound the turning made. I understood that it had always been there, under every other sound I had ever heard, and that I had never once been quiet enough to hear it.

Minute 5:13. Here is the part the tape shows most clearly, and I understand it least.

On the screen, the young man stops laughing. All at once, as if a switch had been turned. He sits up straight. He puts both hands out in front of him, palms down, and pushes, slowly, at the air, as if he were pushing against a pane of glass that no one else can see. His face is very serious. He is looking at something to the left of the camera.

Where I was, the turning had become a set of pages.

I don't know how else to say this. The room was no longer a wheel. It was a book, a thick one, lying open, and I was one of the pages, and something was turning the pages one at a time, from right to left, and every page was a room. Danny's room, with me on the wall. Then the same room, empty. Then the same room with the lamp in a different place. Then a room I had never seen, with green tiles. Then a bus shelter in the rain. Then a hospital corridor. Then a white room with nothing in it but a window.

Each page turned over me and pressed me flat and moved on, and I was pressed flat into each room in turn, and for as long as the page lay on me I was that room: its walls, its air, its light. And then the

next page came over.

I was pushing at them. That is what the tape shows. I was trying to hold the pages still.

Minute 5:18. I want to tell you about time here, because this is where it broke.

You have been reading these little numbers, the ones the counter shows. Four minutes and forty-four seconds. Five minutes and eighteen seconds. Between those two numbers, thirty-four seconds passed in Danny's bedroom. I know that because the tape says so, and a tape cannot lie about that.

Inside, I do not know how long it was. It was not long, and it was not short. It was like asking how long a smell lasts, or how heavy a color is. The question did not fit.

The pages were turning, one room after another, and some of them turned in the time it takes to blink, and some of them lay on me for what felt like a whole afternoon. In one of them it was raining the whole time. In one of them it was night and then morning, and I watched the window go from black to grey to white, and that was one page.

If you have ever woken in the night and not known, for a second, what day it is, or where the door is, or how old you are, you have been in the doorway of this. I was all the way through the door, and it had closed behind me, and I had no idea any more which side of it was the real one.

Minute 5:24. And then I was afraid.

Not the shape of fear this time. The real thing. It came up from the bottom of me like water filling a room, and it had one clear thought in it, the only clear thought I had had since I breathed in: *I have been here before.*

Not in Danny's room. Not in any of the pages. In this *feeling*. In being small and flat and pressed against a wall in the dark, while something enormous happened in the middle of the room, and I could not move, and I could not look away, and I could not make a sound.

I did not know where that feeling came from. I knew only that it was old, much older than the party, older than Los Angeles, and that it had been waiting for me at the back of this place the way a dog waits at a door.

On the tape, the young man on the carpet has gone very still. His hands have dropped to his lap. Danny's voice, much quieter now, says, "Tomás? You good?"

I did not hear him. I was being pulled, harder now, to the left, through the last of the pages.

Minute 5:29. The last page was dark.

It was not black, the way a room is black with the lights off. It was dark the way the country is dark, with no street lamps for miles: a deep, blue, soft dark that you can see into once your eyes stop fighting it.

The pull stopped. The turning stopped. Even the hum sank away, somewhere far beneath everything, and in the space where it had been, I heard something I had not heard in thirteen years.

Rain on a tin roof.

And under it, very close, a small sound, patient and regular, like someone counting under their breath.

III. THE BOY IN THE KITCHEN

Minute 5:30. I was lying on my side on a floor.

It was not carpet. I knew that before I knew anything else, because my cheek was on it, and it was cool and a little damp and gave very slightly under my weight, the way a garden path gives after rain. It smelled of earth. Not dirt, the way a doormat smells of dirt. Earth: the dark, living smell of the ground itself, the smell that comes up out of a flowerbed when you push your fingers into it.

A dirt floor. Packed hard by years of bare feet, swept smooth, cool at night.

On the tape, the young man on the carpet has tipped slowly onto his side, the way a sleeping child tips over on a sofa. His knees are drawn up a little. His hands are together in front of his chest. Danny's hand comes into the frame and rests for a moment on his shoulder, and goes away again.

Minute 5:36. I lay still and let the place arrive, one thing at a time, the way you let a room arrive when you wake up somewhere you do not remember falling asleep.

First, the rain. It was falling on a roof made of sheets of tin, and it did not patter the way rain patters on a window. It drummed: a close, steady, hollow roar, so loud and so even that after a while it stopped being a sound and became a kind of weather inside the head. Under it, now and then, a single heavy drop fell from somewhere nearer, onto something metal, and rang.

Second, the smoke. Wood smoke, from a fire that was nearly out. Somewhere to my right, low down, there was a hearth, a place on the floor ringed with stones, and in it a few coals were still alive. They gave off no flame. They gave off a dull, breathing orange, the color of the inside of a closed eyelid when you face the sun. Every few seconds one of them brightened and dimmed again, as if the fire were slowly thinking.

Third, the dark. It was the country dark I told you about, blue and deep and soft. But now, with the coals, I could see a little. The shape of a wall made of wooden boards, with light-colored lines of wet showing between them. The dark mouth of a doorway at the back. A table with something on it, a bowl perhaps. Bundles of

something hanging from the beams of the roof, drying.

A kitchen. A poor one, and old. The kind of room that is the whole house.

Minute 5:44. And fourth, the counting.

It had been there since the last page closed, under the rain. Now I could hear it clearly. A small voice, very close to me, saying numbers in Spanish, softly, carefully, in the voice children use when they are concentrating so hard that they have forgotten anyone might be listening.

Trece. Catorce. Thirteen. Fourteen.

I turned my head, and the floor turned with it, slowly, the way the world turns when you roll over in the sea.

Minute 5:49. There was a boy sitting on the floor by the hearth.

He was about seven years old. He was barefoot, and his feet were grey with dust, and he sat with his legs crossed and his back very straight, the way children sit when they have been told to sit properly and are trying hard to get it right. He wore a man's white shirt, far too big for him, with the sleeves rolled up several times and the hem down past his knees, and short trousers, and his hair had been cut at home with scissors, a little crooked over one ear.

In his lap there was a pile of leaves.

They were large leaves, each one about as long as his hand, soft-looking, deep green, with fine teeth along the edges and pale veins that ran out from the middle like the ribs of a fan. Fresh leaves, still full of water; I could smell them from where I lay, green and a little bitter, like the smell of crushed stems on your fingers after pulling weeds.

He was taking them from the pile one at a time, looking at each one, and laying it on his other knee, and counting.

Quince. Dieciséis. Fifteen. Sixteen.

He had the kind of face that was going to be serious for the rest of its life. Dark eyes, very steady. In the orange light of the coals, the whites of them shone.

Minute 5:55. He looked up and saw me, and he was not surprised.

That was the first thing that frightened me. Not the dirt floor, not the rain, not the fact that thirty seconds ago I had been a wall in Los Angeles. It was that this child looked at a grown man lying on the floor of his kitchen in the middle of the night, a stranger in a college sweatshirt with his cheek in the dust, and did not jump, did not cry out, did not run. He only nodded, once, the way you nod at a bus that has come at last after a long wait.

"Ya llegaste [yah yeh-GAHS-teh]," he said. You came. Or: You're here at last.

I sat up. I remember that sitting up took a very long time, and that the room stayed where it was while I did it, which felt like a kindness.

"I've been waiting," the boy said, in Spanish. He spoke the way my grandmother spoke, with the soft mountain voice I had not heard in years, where the words seem to be said a little further back in the throat. "I lost something here. In this house. I can't find it by myself."

Minute 6:01. Now I will tell you what I thought, because I was wrong, and I want you to see how easy it was to be wrong.

All week, in the reports I had read in the dark, people had written about meeting *someone* on the other side. A presence, they called it. A figure. Sometimes it was a woman, sometimes a child, sometimes a thing with no shape at all that they simply knew was there, watching, the way you know someone has come into a room behind you. Some people found it kind. Some found it terrifying. Almost everyone said it had seemed to be waiting for them.

So I thought: *here it is. This is the someone.* My mind has made a little boy out of the dark, and put him in a kitchen, and given him a lost thing to find, because that is the sort of story minds like. I thought I was being very clever. I thought I understood exactly where I was.

I am telling you this so that you will not think, later, that I should have known. I should have. I didn't.

Minute 6:06. On the tape, at this point, the young man lying on his side on the carpet begins to whisper.

It is hard to hear over the music. I have turned the volume all the way up and held the camera to my ear. He is whispering in Spanish. A few words, then a pause, then a few more, as if he is answering someone.

In the doorway, the tall brother from Sacramento says, "Is he speaking Spanish?"

And Danny, without looking away from me, says, "His mom's from Mexico. Shut up a second."

Minute 6:10. "What did you lose?" I asked the boy. In Spanish. I had not spoken Spanish out loud for a long time, and I had not spoken it to a child since I was one. It came out rusty and too careful, like a key that has been in a drawer for years.

He thought about it. He looked down at the leaves in his lap and back up at me.

"I don't know what it's called," he said. "But I'll know it when I see it."

Then he looked past me, into the dark mouth of the doorway at the back of the kitchen. He looked at it the way you look at a dog you are not sure about. And he looked away again quickly, and went back to his leaves.

Diecisiete. Seventeen.

Minute 6:16. "What are those?" I said. "The leaves."

The boy stopped counting. He looked at me for a long moment with his serious eyes, as if I had asked something so obvious that it might be a trick. Then he picked one leaf off the pile, carefully, by its stem, and held it up between us in the light of the coals, so that I could see the veins shining in it like wire.

"Ska María Pastora [SKAH mah-REE-ah pahs-TOH-rah]," he said.

Minute 6:19. I want to stop here, because this is the moment the whole of this story turns on, and I do not want you to miss it.

Ska, the boy explained, when I asked, is the word for *leaf* in the old language of the mountains, the language my mother's people spoke long before anyone spoke Spanish there. *María Pastora* is Spanish: *Mary the Shepherdess*. The people of those mountains are Catholic and something older at the same time, the way a house can be two ages at once, and they had given this leaf to the Virgin Mary, and called her a shepherdess, a keeper of lost sheep.

The leaf of Mary the Shepherdess. That was its name.

And the moment he said it, I was back on the carpet in Danny's room, looking at the desk. Not really; I was still on the dirt floor. But I saw the desk as clearly as I see this camera on my knees. The glass pipe. The yellow lighter. And the little printed bag, folded over at the top, lying on its side.

I had not read it. I told you that, and it was true. But I had *seen* it, the way you see the words on the side of a truck that passes you on the freeway, without meaning to, without ever reading them. And now, on that dirt floor, in that rain, the words came up out of wherever I had put them, one letter at a time, printed in green across the front of the bag:

SALVIA DIVINORUM.

Minute 6:24. *Salvia* [SAL-vee-ah]. I knew that word. Everybody knows that word. It is *sage*, the herb, the grey-green one in little jars on the spice shelf at the supermarket, the one your aunt puts in the stuffing at Thanksgiving. The garden sages are all its cousins; there are hundreds of kinds.

Divinorum [dih-vih-NOR-um]. That one I had to work at. It was Latin, and it had the word *divine* in it, and I knew enough to know what the ending meant. *Of the divine ones*. Or, the way the boy would say it later: *of the ones who see*. *The seers*. *The diviners*. The sage of the diviners.

The stuff in Danny's glass pipe, the stuff that twenty-five dollars had bought over the counter on the boulevard, the stuff that had made the young man in Monday's video slide off his chair and talk to the carpet, and that had made me into a wall and rolled Danny's bedroom into a tube and turned it like a wheel and pressed me flat

under a hundred rooms, was this. Was the leaf in this boy's hand.

The smoke shop called it by its Latin name. The boy called it by its holy one. It was the same plant.

Minute 6:31. I think that you, reading this, have been waiting for that name since the first page. I think you may have guessed. I could not have. I had made sure of it.

And I will tell you honestly what I felt when I understood, sitting on that floor, because it surprised me. I did not feel clever, or frightened, or high. I felt ashamed. The way you feel when you have walked into a church in your outdoor clothes, laughing at something, and suddenly realize where you are, and everyone has turned to look.

I had come to this place on a dare. I had come as a joke, with a camera, to see if it could make me feel anything. And the boy had been sitting here the whole time, in the rain, counting its leaves one by one, as carefully as if each one were alive.

Minute 6:38. "Who taught you that?" I asked him. "The name."

"She did," said the boy. And he tilted his head, very slightly, toward the dark doorway at the back of the kitchen, without looking at it.

I did not ask who *she* was. I did not want to know. There was something about that doorway that made the skin on my arms go tight, the way it does at the top of a tall building when you look over the edge.

"You have to hold them carefully," the boy said, looking at the leaves in his lap. "You mustn't drop one. She says if you drop one, the question gets lost."

"What question?"

He did not answer that. Instead he asked me something, without looking up.

"Is it Sunday yet?"

"No," I said. "It's Saturday. Saturday night."

He nodded, as if that were bad news he had been expecting. "He calls on Sundays," he said. "At the shop in the square. They shout for us and we run." He smoothed a leaf flat on his knee. "He didn't call last Sunday. Or the one before."

I thought he meant his father. I thought, *poor kid*, the easy way you think it about a stranger, and I did not think anything else at all. I have wondered since how a person can hear a thing that plainly and feel nothing but a small, polite sadness. I think it is because I had spent thirteen years building a wall exactly the right size to stop that sentence, and the wall was doing its job.

He laid the last leaf on his knee, and counted it, and then he gathered them all up together in both hands, the way you would pick up a small animal, and stood.

Minute 6:44. On the tape, at this point, the young man on the carpet sits up.

His eyes are open, but he is not looking at the camera, or at Danny, or at any of them. He is looking at the floor just in front of him, at something about the height of a child. His hands come up from his lap and cup together, as if someone had just put something into them.

In the doorway, the girl in the green sweater has stopped smiling.

Minute 6:50. The boy stood in front of me in the orange light, holding the leaves against his chest, and held out his other hand.

"Vamos a buscar [BAH-mohs ah boos-KAR]," he said. Let's go and look.

I took his hand. It was small and dry and warm, and very real, and it closed around my two fingers the way a child's hand does, with complete trust, as if it had held them many times before.

And we went to look.

IV. TWO TELLINGS

Minute 6:52. The boy did not go toward the doorway at the back. He led me the other way, to the front of the kitchen, where there was a door I had not noticed, and he lifted the wooden latch with one hand, the other still full of leaves, and pushed it open with his shoulder.

The door was blue.

It was painted the bright, cheap blue of a swimming pool, and the paint was old and had flaked away in patches, so that the grey wood showed through in shapes like countries on a map. I put my hand on it as I went through. I don't know why. Under my palm, the flakes of paint were rough and loose, and one of them came away and stuck to my skin.

I knew, before I thought it, exactly how that paint would feel. I knew the latch would stick if you lifted it too fast. I knew there was a nail head sticking out at the height of a child's eye, and that if you were small and running you learned to duck it.

I looked. The nail was there.

It was my grandmother's door. It was my grandmother's house. I knew it the way you know your own handwriting on an envelope you do not remember sending. I had not seen that door for thirteen years, and I had not once, in all that time, let myself picture it, and here it was, under my hand, with its nail.

Minute 6:58. Outside it was still raining, but softly now, a fine grey rain that hung in the air more than it fell. We were on a path of packed earth and flat stones, running downhill between other houses like the first one: wooden walls, tin roofs, a lamp in one window, a dog asleep under a table on a porch. Above us, where the sky should have been, there was cloud, so low and so close that I could have reached up into it. The cloud was moving. Not blowing across. Breathing, slowly in and slowly out, the way a sleeping animal's side moves.

The path curved. That is the only way I can put it. It went downhill and it curved to the left, and it went on curving, gently, the whole time we walked, as if the village had been built on the inside of a bowl, or a shell, or the palm of a hand, and every step took us a

little further round the rim. When I looked back, the blue door was behind us. When I looked ahead, a little later, the blue door was in front of us again, far away, lit by the lamp in the window, getting nearer.

I understood that we were not really going anywhere. The boy was walking me around the house, the long way, the way you walk around something you are not ready to go into.

Minute 7:04. On the tape, at this point, I stand up.

It is the first time I have moved properly since the pipe. I get up off the carpet in one long, careful, unsteady motion, the way a person stands up in a boat, and I start to walk. Not toward the door. Toward the window, the one in the wall I had been. My eyes are open. I am smiling a little. I walk as if I know exactly where I am going.

Danny moves faster than I have ever seen him move. He gets between me and the window and puts both hands flat on my chest, very gently, and says, "No, no, no, buddy. Sit down. You're good. Sit down," and he walks me backward, one step at a time, until the backs of my knees touch the bed and I fold down onto the carpet again.

I have watched that part five times. Where I was, I was walking down a wet path in the mountains, holding a little boy's hand. Where my body was, it was walking toward a second-floor window.

This is the real danger of this leaf, and I want to say it plainly, because the videos never do. It is not poison. It is that for a few minutes the mind goes somewhere else completely and forgets to take the body with it, and the body, left alone in the room, may decide to go for a walk. Every report I had read said *have someone sober with you*. This is why. Danny kept his promise, and I am here to tell you this, and that is not a small thing.

Minute 7:10. "Tell me about the leaf," I said to the boy, as we walked. "Tell me what it's for."

He looked up at me, surprised, as if he had assumed I knew. Then he told me, and he told it the way children tell things they have

been told by grown-ups: exactly, in the same order, in the same words, careful not to leave anything out.

The leaf is holy, he said. You never pick it for nothing. You never laugh at it. You never step on it.

It is used at night, when the house is quiet and the village is asleep. You chew the fresh leaves, not dry ones, and you sit in the dark, with no light at all, and nobody talks. The silence is the most important part. The leaf can only speak when everybody else has stopped.

And you ask it a question.

Minute 7:16. “What kind of question?” I said.

“When somebody is sick,” the boy said, “and the doctor doesn’t know why. You ask the leaf what the sickness is, and what will make it go away.” He counted on his fingers, holding the leaves against his chest with his other arm. “When a cow runs away and you can’t find it. You ask where the cow went. When somebody takes money from your house. You ask who took it.”

He stopped walking and looked at me very seriously.

“And when somebody goes away,” he said, “and doesn’t come back. You ask where they went.”

The rain hung in the air between us.

“She knows how to ask,” the boy said. “She’s the best one in all the mountains. People come from very far away to sit with her.”

Minute 7:22. I asked him if anyone had ever come from *very* far away. I meant it as a joke. I was trying to make the child smile.

He didn’t smile. He nodded.

He said that a long time ago, before he was born, before his mother was born, some men from the north had come up the mountain looking for the leaf. One of them was a rich man from New York, who worked with money, who had already come many times before for the little mushrooms, and who wanted to know about the leaf too. And the next year he came again, and he brought a man who made medicines in a laboratory far away across the sea, and the

man's wife. And one night, in a house in one of the villages, a healer sat with them in the dark and gave them the leaf, and the wife chewed it, and the rich man chewed it, and the man who made medicines chewed it too, later. And then they took some leaves away with them in a box, so that the men in the laboratory could find out what was inside.

"Did they find out?" I asked.

The boy shrugged. "The leaves went rotten on the way," he said. "That's what she says. They didn't know you have to keep them fresh."

I laughed. It was the first time I had laughed since the wall, and it was a real laugh, a small one, and the boy looked pleased with himself.

(I have checked this since. The boy was right, or near enough. The rich man from New York was a banker named Gordon Wasson, who wrote about the leaf after he chewed it for the first time in 1961. The man from across the sea was a Swiss chemist named Albert Hofmann. In October 1962, in a village called San José Tenango, his wife Anita and Wasson sat with a Mazatec healer and took the leaf; Albert was ill that night and took it later on the same journey. They crushed fresh leaves, kept the juice in alcohol, and carried it home to Switzerland to study, and when they tested it there, it no longer worked. For thirty years after that, nobody could prove what in the leaf did the work. The boy did not know those names. He knew the story.)

Minute 7:31. "Now you," the boy said. "You tell me something. What do *they* say about it? The people where you live."

So I told him. I told him everything I had read that week, and I told it the way you tell a bedtime story, slowly, in simple words, because that was the only kind of Spanish I had left, and because he was seven.

I told him that where I lived, the leaf had a long name in a very old language, and that the first half of the name meant the same plant as a herb that people put in their food, and the second half meant *of the ones who see*. He liked that. He said it over to himself: *the ones*

who see.

I told him that the plant almost never makes seeds. That out of all the plants in the world, this is one of the only ones that can hardly have children of its own. That nearly every one of these plants that is alive anywhere today is alive because somebody cut a piece off another one and carried it, by hand, and put it in the ground, and watered it.

The boy was quiet for a long time after that. Then he said, "Like us."

"What do you mean?"

"We have to be carried," he said. "When we go north. Somebody has to carry us." He said it as a plain fact, the way you'd say that rain is wet. "He went first. Then he's going to send for us."

I did not ask who *he* was. I told myself I knew: some father, some village man, gone north like thousands of others. I told myself it was nothing to do with me.

Minute 7:40. On the tape, I have my eyes closed now. I am sitting against the bed where Danny put me, with my hands cupped in my lap again, and my lips are moving.

The girl in the green sweater has gone. The brother from Sacramento is still in the doorway, but he is not grinning any more. He is holding his drink in both hands, like something to hold on to.

Minute 7:46. "Why does it do that?" the boy asked. "Make you go somewhere. How does it know how?"

This was the part I had read most carefully, and I tried very hard to get it right, and to say it so that a child would understand. I will say it to you the same way.

Your brain, I told him, is full of little locks. Not real locks: tiny shapes, on the outsides of the cells that do your thinking. And your body makes its own keys for those locks, all day, every day, to switch things on and off. A key for *wake up*. A key for *go to sleep*. A key for *this hurts*. A key for *that's enough now*.

Most plants that take you somewhere strange, I told him, fit one particular lock, one that has to do with seeing and feeling. But this

leaf is different. It fits a lock that nothing else like it fits. A lock the body uses, as far as anyone can tell, for something like *stop, enough, go away*: the switch the body throws when it has had too much of something. And when the leaf turns that key all the way, suddenly and all at once, the world does not just look different. The world goes away. And something else comes in to take its place.

"Like a door," the boy said.

"Like a door," I said.

Minute 7:55. I told him that for years nobody knew which part of the leaf was the key. Chemists in Mexico found a new substance in it in the early 1980s and gave it a name, *salvinorin* [sal-vih-NOR-in], and nobody could prove it did anything. Then, in 1993, a man in California named Daniel Siebert tried a tiny amount of the pure substance on himself, and found out in a very few seconds that it did. He was the first person to know for certain what was in the leaf that opened the door. It turned out to be the strongest thing of its kind known to grow anywhere in nature, by weight: a few specks of it, too small to see, were enough.

And then in 2002, I told him, a team of scientists led by a man named Bryan Roth worked out exactly which lock it fit. Nobody had guessed. It was a lock that no other plant like it had ever been known to touch.

The boy thought about that. "So the man in California was brave," he said.

"I think he was curious," I said. "Maybe that's the same thing."

(I did not tell the boy what I told you in the first part of this: that the stuff in Danny's glass pipe had been bought over a shop counter in Los Angeles for twenty-five dollars, and that people were filming each other taking it for fun, and that one state, Louisiana, had already made it illegal to sell for people to take, and another, Delaware, had banned it completely after the death of a teenage boy whose parents believed the leaf had played a part. I did not tell him because I was ashamed to say it in front of him. I am telling you now because it is true, and you should know.)

Minute 7:58. “Where does it grow?” the boy asked. “The leaf. Does it grow where you live too?”

No, I told him. Not by itself. It is a kind of sage, a cousin of the mint in a kitchen garden: square stems, leaves in pairs, small white-and-purple flowers that hardly ever come. And it grows, as far as anyone knows, in only one place in the world. Here. In these mountains, in damp shady places near streams, in the gardens of the people who have always kept it. Nobody has ever found a patch of it growing wild that they could be sure nobody had planted. It may be that it does not grow wild anywhere. It may be that every one of these plants, everywhere on earth, is the great-great-grandchild of a cutting that somebody from this village, or the next one, carried home in their hand.

“Then it’s ours,” the boy said.

“It was,” I said. “Now it’s in shops.”

Minute 8:01. “Why is it so short?” he asked. “When she sits with it, it doesn’t take all night. Only a little while. Then she comes back.”

This was one I knew. The key goes in fast, I told him, and it comes out fast. The body has little cleaners, working all the time, whose job is to clear keys away once they have been used. They find this one very quickly and break it apart. So when the leaf is chewed, slowly, the way she does it, the door opens slowly and stays open for about an hour. And when it is smoked, the way the people in the shops sell it, the key arrives all at once, in a few seconds, and is gone again in a few minutes, and the door slams open and then slowly closes. That is why the young man in Monday’s video was back in his chair, laughing about it, before the video was over. And that is why my tape runs for thirty-four minutes, and not for a night.

I told him the name the scientists gave the lock, because he asked, and because he liked long words. They call it the *kappa-opioid receptor* [KAP-uh OH-pee-oyd rih-SEP-ter]. *Receptor* just means a lock that receives a key. *Opioid* is because it belongs to a family of locks that the key in opium also fits, though opium fits a different member of the family: the one for pleasure and for stopping pain. *Kappa* is a letter of the Greek alphabet, a name for this one member of the family. That is all. A long name for a small, strange door.

Minute 8:03. “Is it bad?” the boy asked. “The leaf. Is it bad for you?”

I wanted to tell him no. He was seven, and it was his grandmother’s leaf, and he was holding a great pile of it against his chest. But I had promised myself I would tell him only true things, so I told him what I had read, and I will tell you the same, as plainly as I told him.

It does not seem to poison the body, I said. Nobody has found that it hurts the heart, or the liver, or the lungs, the way many other things people take for fun do. As far as anyone had found, nobody had died from the leaf itself. But nobody has studied it for very long, either, and nobody knows what happens if a person takes it again and again for years.

It does not seem to make people need it. The lock it opens is not the lock that makes people come back for more and more, the one heroin and opium use. It is almost the opposite. Most people who try it once never want to try it again. Some try it twice. Very few people take it every week. The door it opens is not a nice place to want to go back to.

It can frighten people very badly. Not everybody, but many. The world goes away so fast, and so completely, that some people think they have died, or gone mad, or will never come back. For a few minutes, that fear is the whole universe. The reports I had read were full of it: people who screamed, people who wept, people who came back shaking and could not sleep that night. A few said the fear stayed with them for days.

It can make people’s mood go down, not up. The lock it turns seems to be one the body uses to say *enough*, and some scientists think that when it is turned too hard, a person can come away flat and low for a while after, the opposite of the happiness people expect from a drug.

It takes the body away from the person. This is the one I had read most about, and the one Danny had promised to guard me from. For a few minutes you are not there to look after yourself. People walk into walls, into furniture, into windows, into roads. People fall down stairs. That is why the healers sit on the floor, in the dark, in silence, with someone watching. That is why every report says *never alone*.

And it is not for everyone. I told the boy this last, and more carefully. For a person whose mind is already fragile, whose thoughts already sometimes slide away from them, a door like this can open onto something that does not close again easily. Doctors warn about this for every plant and every medicine that does what this leaf does. It is not a toy for a mind that is already struggling.

Minute 8:05. “And the shops,” the boy said. “What they sell. Is it the same as this?”

He held up a leaf. I shook my head.

What the shops sell, I told him, is not a leaf. It is leaf that has been soaked and boiled down and dried, again and again, until what is left is many times stronger than any leaf that ever grew. They print a number on the bag: *five times, ten times, twenty times*. That number is the difference between a door opening and a door being kicked in. The healers chew fresh leaves, slowly, for a long time, and the leaf comes to them gently, and they can sit with it and ask their question and come back and remember what they saw. The people in the videos breathe in a whole field of leaves in one breath, in a room full of music and strangers, and the door comes off its hinges.

The boy looked at the leaf in his hand for a long time.

“She would be very angry,” he said finally. “If she knew.”

I thought about that. About my grandmother, who never let anyone step on a leaf. About Danny’s camera. About twenty-five dollars.

“I think she’d be sad,” I said. “More than angry.”

He nodded. He knew her too.

Minute 8:06. “Then why does it matter?” the boy said. “If it’s so small. If it only grows here. If it only lasts a little while. Why did the men from the north come all this way for it? Why did the man in California try it on himself?”

And I tried to tell him why it matters. I will try to tell you too.

It matters, first, because it is different from every other plant like it that anyone has ever found. Nearly every plant or mushroom that

takes the mind somewhere strange, that people had studied before, has a key built around a certain kind of atom, called nitrogen [NY-truh-jen], one of the ordinary building blocks of living things. And the most famous of them all fit the same one lock, a lock for the brain's own messenger of mood and seeing. Scientists thought that was simply how it worked, the way you might think every bird can fly until somebody shows you a penguin. This leaf is the penguin. Its key has no nitrogen in it at all, and it fits a lock nobody had thought to look at. It told the scientists that the mind has more doors than they knew about.

It matters, second, because of what that lock might be good for. If you can find a key that fits the *enough* lock without taking a person's whole world away, scientists hoped, you might one day make a medicine that stops pain without making people need it, the way morphine does. Or a medicine that helps people stop needing the other drugs. By the spring I am telling you about, those were only hopes, written in scientific papers. But they were real hopes, and they started with this leaf.

And it matters, third, because of the people it belongs to. There are not many plants like this in the world that are still used the old way, by the people who first found them, for the reason they first found them. This is one. Hundreds of years after the Spanish came, after the priests, after the roads and the radios and the men going north, in these mountains there are still people who sit in the dark with this leaf to ask where someone has gone. That is not a small thing. That is a door that has been kept open for a very long time, carefully, by hand, the way the plant itself has been kept alive.

The boy listened to all of that without moving. Then he said, "So it's like a key to a door nobody else knew was there."

"Yes," I said. "Exactly like that."

"And she has the key."

"She had the key," I said.

I heard the word only after it was out of my mouth. *Had*. The boy heard it too. He looked at me sharply, the way children look at you when you say something grown-ups are not supposed to say in front of them.

She had been dead for three years. My grandmother, the one who knew how to ask. Here, in her village, in her rain, the boy talked about her as if she were in the next room. But I knew better, somewhere under everything, and the knowing had slipped out in one small word.

I had not gone to her funeral. I had not cried for her. I had not said her name out loud since the day my mother came home from burying her. And now, in the middle of the strangest night of my life, that one word, *had*, sat between the boy and me like a stone on the path, and neither of us stepped over it.

I looked away first.

Minute 8:08. And I told him about the one person whose story I had kept, out of all the reports I read that week. I told it to him the way I remembered it, and I will tell it to you the same way, because it matters to what happened next.

There was a man named Terence McKenna, who spent his life trying to find words for places the mind goes that have no words. He was not a scientist. He was a talker, the best one there has ever been at this, and he had been to more of these places than almost anyone alive. In an interview he gave near the end of his life, he told about the first time he tried this leaf. He said he was nervous beforehand, afraid of it. And he said that when it began, the leaf seemed to answer his fear by making fun of it: it showed him visions so simple and so harmless that they were fit for a six-year-old child. As if it were saying: *is this what you're afraid of?* And he told it, more or less, that he was braver than that, and that it could show him a little more.

The boy listened to all of this very seriously. Then he said, "Six?"

"Six," I said.

"I'm seven," he said, a little offended, and I laughed again, and so did he.

I did not notice, then, what I had just been told. That the leaf answers fear with a child.

Minute 8:15. We had come a long way round the rim of the village by now, and the path had begun to climb, and the rain had stopped. There was water running beside the path in a little ditch, loud and quick, and I could hear, somewhere ahead and below us, the bigger sound of a river.

"Can I ask you something?" the boy said. "Are you still angry at him?"

"At who?"

He didn't answer. He only looked at me, the way my grandmother used to look at me when I pretended not to know who had broken something.

Minute 8:21. Then he told me the word.

We had stopped at a place where the path widened, by a low stone wall with ferns growing out of the cracks. The boy set the leaves down on the top of the wall, very carefully, in a neat pile, and sat beside them, and swung his bare feet.

"Do you know what *susto* [SOOS-toh] is?" he said.

I said I didn't.

He explained it to me as if I were the child.

When something frightens you very badly, he said, all at once, so badly that you can't breathe, a piece of you falls out. It jumps out of you, the way a frog jumps out of your hands. And it stays there, in the place where the fright happened. It doesn't follow you home. And you go on walking around, and eating, and going to school, and you look the same as before, but you're not all there. Something's missing. You don't sleep properly. Food doesn't taste of anything. You're sad and you don't know why. You feel like you're behind a window.

He said that. *Like you're behind a window.* I heard him say it.

"And then what?" I said. My voice was not quite working.

"Then somebody has to go and find the piece," the boy said. "Where you left it. And call it back. By name. She does it. She goes to the place, and she calls, and she waits, and the piece comes home." He picked a fern leaf out of the wall and turned it in his fingers. "But

you have to know where you left it. If you don't know where, it can't be found."

Minute 8:29. I sat on the stone wall next to him and I did not say anything for what felt like a long time.

I was thinking about a small room at the student health center, and a kind doctor with a sheet of paper, and the word at the bottom of the sheet. *Depression*. I had never argued with that word. I had thought it was the whole truth, the way you think a map is the whole truth until you try to walk across it.

Now I had two words for the same thing, and they did not cancel each other out. The doctor's word said: *this is what is happening in you*. The boy's word said: *this is where it happened, and something of you is still there*.

I will be careful here, because this is the kind of thing people get wrong in both directions. I am not telling you that the doctor was mistaken, or that the leaf is a medicine, or that it cures anything. It doesn't. The lock it turns, as far as the scientists can tell, if anything pushes a person's mood *down*, not up. I am telling you what a seven-year-old boy said to me on a stone wall inside my own head, and that it was the first thing anybody had ever said about my window that made me feel it could be opened from the outside.

"Is that what you lost?" I asked him. "A piece of yourself?"

He looked at the pile of leaves beside him, and not at me.

"I don't know yet," he said. "Come on. It's by the river."

Minute 8:40. On the tape, a door slams somewhere downstairs, and the young man on the carpet flinches, his whole body, hard, the way you flinch at a gunshot. His eyes open wide. He is staring at nothing, and he looks, for a second, about seven years old himself.

Danny says, very softly, "It's okay. It's just the door. It's okay."

Minute 8:44. The river was loud and brown with rain, running fast between big pale boulders, and the path came down to it at a place where the bank was flat and muddy and there were rocks you could

stand on at the edge.

And I knew this place too.

I knew it the way I had known the nail in the blue door. I had stood on that flat rock with the dip in the middle. I had thrown stones from here. I had been told, a hundred times, never to go further out than that rock when the water was high.

And all at once I thought I understood everything.

Minute 8:49. Here is what I thought. I want you to hear it the way I thought it, because it was so nearly right.

The last summer I lived in the village, when I was seven, I had a cousin, a little one, four years old. His name was Beto. And one afternoon that summer I was supposed to be watching him at the river, and I wasn't. I was throwing stones, trying to hit the far bank. And Beto went out past the flat rock, and slipped, and went into the water.

I had carried that afternoon with me for thirteen years. I had never told anybody how much. It was the worst thing I had ever done, and the first thing I thought of, whenever I thought of the village at all.

So I thought: *that's it*. This is the fright. This is where the piece of me fell out. The boy is some part of this place that has been waiting to show me the worst day of my childhood. We have come to the river because this is where it happened.

"This is it," I said to the boy. "Isn't it? This is what you lost."

The boy didn't answer. He only looked out at the water.

Minute 8:55. And the river showed me.

The afternoon came back all at once, bright and hot, the rain gone, the sun on the water like broken glass. A thin boy of seven on the bank, throwing stones. A little one of four in a yellow shirt, stepping out onto the rocks, arms held out for balance. The slip. The splash, very small. The yellow shirt going under and coming up and going under.

And then something I had forgotten, or had never let myself remember properly: a man running down the bank from the field

above. A neighbor, with a machete still in his belt. He went into the water up to his waist without slowing down, and grabbed Beto by the back of his yellow shirt, and hauled him out like a sack, and turned him upside down, and thumped him on the back. And Beto coughed, and spat out a great deal of brown water, and began to cry, very loudly, which is the best sound a child can make after that. And the neighbor put him down on the bank, and looked at me, and said, not angrily, *watch him better*, and walked back up to his field.

Beto was fine. He was frightened and wet and he told on me. My grandmother was angry with me all evening. And by the next day he had forgotten it and wanted to go back to the river.

That was all. That was the whole of it.

Minute 9:05. I stood on the bank and watched the neighbor walk back up the hill, and I felt something I did not expect. Not relief. Something closer to disappointment. I had been so sure.

It had been a bad afternoon. It had frightened me. I had carried it. But nothing had been lost at the river. My cousin had come out of the water alive and crying. The fright had ended. And frights that end, I thought, do not leave pieces behind.

"That's not it," the boy said, beside me. He said it gently, the way you tell someone they have got the wrong house. "That's not what I lost."

Minute 9:12. On the tape, the young man on the carpet has started to cry.

Not loudly. There is no sound at all. His face is still, and tears are running down it steadily, one after another, and dripping off his chin onto his cupped hands. He does not wipe them. He does not seem to know that they are there.

Danny has turned the camera away. For about six seconds, the screen shows only the corner of the room and the edge of the poster. Then it swings back, and Danny's voice says, to someone in the doorway, "Close the door. Just close it. Please."

The door closes. The music gets quieter.

Minute 9:20. “If it’s not here,” I said to the boy, “then where is it?”

He didn’t answer right away. He was looking back the way we had come, up the long curving path, past the stone wall and the ferns, past the houses and the dog asleep on the porch, all the way back round the rim of the bowl to where the blue door stood, small and far away, with the lamp still burning in the window.

Not the front of the house. Behind it. The back of the house, where there was one more room, with one small window, and no light in it at all.

“I always knew where it was,” the boy said. He picked up his leaves from the stone wall, all of them, and held them tight against his chest. “I just can’t go in by myself.”

Minute 9:31. And standing there on the bank of the river, with the water running loud behind me, I finally looked properly at the boy I had been following for three real minutes that felt like half a night.

At the man’s white shirt, far too big for him, with the sleeves rolled up and up.

At his hair, cut at home with the kitchen scissors, a little crooked over the left ear.

At the way he held the leaves, against his chest, with both arms, as if they might try to get away.

And I thought of my mother, bending over me at the kitchen table in Los Angeles with the same scissors, every month until I was twelve, saying *keep still, keep still*, and cutting it crooked over the left ear every time, because the left was the side she had to reach across for.

And I thought: *that is my father’s shirt.*

Minute 9:40. I did not say it out loud. I did not let myself finish the thought.

I only took the boy’s hand again, the small dry warm hand, and let him turn me around, and start me walking, back up the long curving path in the dark, toward the house with the blue door, and the room behind it with no light.

V. THE REST OF ME

Minute 9:48. We went back the long way, round the rim of the bowl, and the path did the thing it had done before: it curved, and curved, and brought the blue door toward us out of the dark as if someone were reeling it in on a line.

The boy walked a little ahead of me now. He did not let go of my hand, but he pulled, the way children pull you toward a shop window. He was not afraid any more. Or he was, but he had decided something, and the deciding was stronger than the fear.

I was the one who was afraid.

On the tape, the young man on the carpet has stopped crying. His face is wet and very still. His cupped hands are resting in his lap, and he is looking straight ahead, at the closed bedroom door, with the expression of someone waiting to be called in for an interview.

Minute 9:57. We went through the blue door, past the nail, into the kitchen. The coals in the hearth were still breathing orange. The rain had started again on the tin roof, softly. Everything was exactly as we had left it, except that now I knew whose kitchen it was, and so everything was different.

There was the table where my grandmother cut vegetables with a knife that had been sharpened so many times it was as thin as a leaf. There was the shelf with the plastic bottles of rubbing alcohol and the jar of dried flowers. There was the hook where my mother hung her shawl. There, low on the wall by the hearth, were the pencil marks where somebody had measured how tall I was, every birthday, from three to seven, and then stopped.

The boy walked past all of it without looking. He walked straight to the doorway at the back.

And stopped. And waited for me.

Minute 10:04. I have to tell you about the dark in that doorway, because it was not like the other darks.

The dark outside, in the village, had been blue and soft, and you could see into it. The dark in this doorway was black, and flat, and it did not let you in. It was like looking at a sheet of black paper held up in front of your face. It had no depth at all. Your eyes slid off it.

And there was a smell coming out of it. Sweet and heavy, like church. Smoke from a resin that had been burned in there a long time ago and had gone into the boards and never come out.

I knew that smell. I had smelled it in exactly one place in my whole life, and I had not smelled it since.

"I can't go in by myself," the boy said again, very quietly. "I tried. Lots of times."

I held his hand tighter. And we went in together, and the flat black dark folded back, like a curtain, like a page, and the room was lit, and it was full of people.

Minute 10:11. It was not a room. It was a night.

I mean that the room was not empty, waiting for us, the way the kitchen had been. It was a memory, happening, the way a film is happening even if you walk into the cinema late. Everyone in it was already in their places. None of them looked at us. They could not see us. We were standing in the doorway of a night that had already happened, and was happening again, the way it had happened every night for thirteen years somewhere I had never let myself look.

The room was small. A mat woven of dry palm leaves on the dirt floor. A low wooden stool. A shelf on the far wall with pictures of saints on it, and a candle in a glass. The candle was burning. It was the only light.

My grandmother was sitting on the stool.

She was small and straight and old, in a dark skirt and a white blouse with flowers stitched on the neck, and her grey hair was in two long braids tied together at the ends. Her hands were in her lap, folded over each other. She was not moving at all. She was waiting, the way she waited for water to boil, with her whole body.

On the mat in front of her sat my mother.

Minute 10:18. I want to tell you about my mother, because you have only heard about her from me, and I have not been fair to her.

She was twenty-six years old. I had never once, in my whole life, thought of my mother as twenty-six. She was thin, and she was wearing a man's jacket over her dress, too big for her, the way the boy's shirt was too big for him. Her hair was loose. Her face was the face of someone who has not slept properly for a very long time, and has stopped expecting to.

She had a piece of paper in her hands. She was folding it and unfolding it, over and over, along the same creases, so that it had gone soft as cloth. I could not see what was on it. I did not need to. It was the paper with the telephone number of the shop in the square, where someone would shout for us on Sundays when he called, and we would run.

And in the corner of the room, on the floor, with his back against the wall, holding a great pile of fresh green leaves against his chest with both arms, sat the boy.

He was wearing the white shirt. My father's shirt. He had worn it to sleep every night since my father went north, because it still smelled of him, and nobody had been able to make him take it off.

The boy beside me in the doorway squeezed my hand, and did not say anything. He did not need to.

Minute 10:26. Here is what happened in that room, that night, the summer I was seven. I am going to tell it slowly and plainly, the way it happened, and I am not going to make it into anything more than it was.

My father had gone north when I was six, over the border, to find work and send money, and then to send for us. For months he called every Sunday. We would run to the shop in the square when they shouted, and my mother would press the phone to her ear, and then hold it out to me, and I would hear his voice coming from very far away, crackling, laughing, asking if I was being good.

Then one Sunday he did not call. And the next Sunday he did not call. And the one after that.

Nobody knew anything. No letter came. The men in the village who had gone north with other groups had not seen him. My mother went to the shop every day, not just on Sundays, and stood by the

phone, and it did not ring. And after seven weeks of that, she could not bear it any more. Not knowing is its own kind of fright, and it does not end, because there is nothing to end it.

So she did the thing people in those mountains have done for longer than anyone can remember, when somebody goes away and does not come back. She went to the one who knew how to ask. She asked my grandmother to sit with the leaf.

Minute 10:39. I begged to stay. I remember that now, standing in the doorway. I remember begging, and my mother saying no, and my grandmother looking at me for a long time and then saying yes, if I could be quiet. Completely quiet. The whole night, if it took the whole night. And she gave me a job. She gave me the leaves to hold, the fresh ones, the ones that had not been used yet, and she told me the rule.

You hold them carefully. You must not drop one. If you drop one, the question gets lost.

So I sat in the corner, in my father's shirt, holding the leaves, and I did not make a sound.

On the tape, at this point, the young man on the carpet has started, very softly, to count. His lips are moving. You can just hear it under the music if you turn the volume all the way up. Numbers, in Spanish, one after another, slow and careful.

Minute 10:47. My grandmother put the candle out.

The room went dark. Not the flat black of the doorway. The real dark of a room at night with no light in it, where after a while you can see the grey shape of the window and nothing else.

I heard her chewing. A slow, patient sound, like a cow in a field. I heard the rain on the roof. I heard my mother breathing, fast and shallow at first, then slower. I heard my own heart, very loud, in my ears.

And then for a long time I heard nothing at all.

I do not know how long. It felt like a whole night. It was probably half an hour. I have learned, since last night, that those are not so

different.

Minute 10:58. Then my grandmother spoke.

Her voice in the dark was not her ordinary voice. It was lower and slower, and it sounded as if it were coming from a little further away than she was sitting, the way a voice sounds from the next room.

She said that he was in the desert.

She said that it was very hot there in the day and very cold at night, and that there were no trees.

She said that he was lying down. That he was very still. That he was not going to get up.

And she said that he had been walking the whole time toward us. That he had been trying to come back.

Minute 11:06. I am going to stop here, for a moment, because I have to tell you something as plainly as I can.

I do not know how my grandmother knew. I do not know that she *did* know. I am not telling you that the leaf can see across deserts, or that it knows where the dead are. It does not know anything. It is a plant. I am telling you what a frightened boy heard, in the dark, in the corner of a room, with his arms full of leaves. Perhaps she said what a woman says who has watched fifty years of men walk north over those mountains and has seen how many of them come back. Perhaps she said what she was most afraid of, and the dark let her say it out loud. Perhaps it was something else, that I have no word for. I do not know.

What I know is what happened next.

Minute 11:12. My mother screamed.

It is the worst sound I have ever heard. I had not heard it for thirteen years, and I heard it again, standing in the doorway of that room, as clearly as I hear the refrigerator humming in the kitchen downstairs right now. It was not a word. It was not crying. It was the sound a person makes when something is torn out of them.

And the boy in the corner, the boy in my father's shirt, jumped so hard at the sound that his arms flew open, and the leaves went everywhere. All of them. All over the dark floor.

He had dropped them. Not one. All of them.

If you drop one, the question gets lost.

And he got up, and ran. Out of the room, through the kitchen, out of the blue door, into the rain and the night, down the path, round the rim of the village, all the way to the square. To the shop. To the phone. He sat down on the wet step under the shop's tin awning, in my father's shirt, and waited for it to ring, because if it rang, then it would not be true.

He waited all night. It did not ring.

Minute 11:25. The letter came five weeks later.

It came from the Mexican consulate, in an American city whose name my mother could not pronounce, and a man from the church in the next town came up the mountain to read it to her, because it was in the kind of Spanish that officials write. It said that the remains of a man had been found in the desert on the other side of the border. That he had been carrying papers. That the papers had my father's name on them. That arrangements could be made.

I was in the kitchen when the man read it. I remember that too, now. I remember standing by the pencil marks on the wall, and nobody looking at me. You can know a thing at seven and not know it at the same time. You can hear it, and put it somewhere, and never go back for it.

That autumn my mother took me north. Over the same border, by a different way, in the back of a truck, with a lot of other people, and a lot of water. I do not remember much of it. I remember that my mother held my hand the whole way, so hard that it hurt, and that she did not let go even when I was asleep.

And in Los Angeles, in the small apartment in the east of the city, she made a decision. I understand it now. I did not then. She was twenty-six and alone in a new country with a child, and she could not grieve and work and live all at once, and she could not have her son grieving too. So she chose a story she could live inside. She told

me, and everyone, that my father had *left us*. That he had gone north and found something better and not wanted us any more.

She said it until it was the only story in the house. She said it until I believed it. She said it, I think, until part of her believed it too, because it was easier to be angry at a man who had left than to miss a man who had been walking home.

Minute 11:41. And the boy believed something else. Something worse than either story. He never told anyone, and so nobody could ever tell him it was wrong.

He believed that asking had done it.

That if my mother had never asked, and my grandmother had never sat with the leaf, and he had never begged to stay, and never dropped the leaves, and never let the question get lost, my father would still be out there somewhere, alive, walking north. That the answer had not *found* my father. The answer had *made* it true. And he had helped.

That is a thing only a seven-year-old could believe. And a seven-year-old did believe it, with his whole body, in the dark, in the rain, on the step under the silent phone.

And then he put it down, and walked away from it, and grew up.

Minute 11:52. I looked down at the boy standing beside me in the doorway, holding my hand, in my father's shirt, with his hair cut crooked over the left ear.

And I let myself finish the thought I had not let myself finish by the river.

He was me.

Not a presence. Not a thing my mind had made out of the dark to entertain itself. Not my cousin. Me. The seven-year-old I had been, on that night. Or rather, the part of that seven-year-old that had not come out of that room. The part the scream had knocked out of him, the way a frog jumps out of your hands. The part that had stayed there, in the corner, in the dark, among the dropped leaves, for thirteen years, while the rest of him went north in the back of a

truck and learned English and went to school and got good grades and laughed at the right times and felt nothing.

Susto. A fright so big a piece of you falls out, and stays where it fell.

The flatness the doctor had given a name to. The window I had been living behind. It was not a window. It was the shape of him. It was the exact size and shape of a small boy who had been left behind in a dark room with the worst news in the world and no one to tell it to.

Minute 12:03. And I understood the other thing too, and I want to say it as plainly as I can, because it is the reason for this whole story.

I had come to the party for the strangeness. To see if anything was left in me that could still be surprised. To find out if the window could break.

The boy had been waiting for thirteen years to ask one question. The question he had dropped. *Where did he go?*

Those were not two different reasons. They were the same reason, coming from two ends of the same life. The young man who wanted to feel something, and the boy who needed to know where his father was. Both of them reaching, at the same time, for the same door. I had thought I was coming here for a thrill. I had been coming here, without knowing it, to fetch him.

Minute 12:10. On the tape, at this point, the young man on the carpet slowly leans forward, and puts one hand flat on the carpet in front of him, and then the other. And then, very carefully, he begins to pick things up off the floor.

There is nothing there. The camera shows the carpet, a bottle cap, a sock under the bed. But he is picking things up, one at a time, with great care, between his finger and thumb, and laying them in his other hand. And counting. You can hear it now, because someone downstairs has turned the music off. *Uno. Dos. One. Two.*

Minute 12:18. I let go of the boy's hand, and I walked into the room.

Past my mother on the mat, folding and unfolding her paper. Past my grandmother on the stool, in the dark, with her hands in her lap. Neither of them looked up. They were in their night, and I was in mine, and for this one moment the two nights were the same room.

I went to the corner where he had sat. The floor there was covered with leaves, where they had fallen when he ran, green and soft in the dark, all over the packed earth.

And I sat down in his place, with my back to the wall.

And I began to pick them up.

One at a time. The way he had counted them in the kitchen. Carefully, by the stem, so as not to bruise them. Laying each one on my knee. Counting under my breath. And after a while the boy came and sat down beside me, close, his shoulder against my arm, and picked them up too, and handed them to me, and we counted together.

We did not say anything else. We kept the silence. This time, nobody ran.

Minute 13:02. When we had picked up every leaf, the boy put his head against my arm, and asked me the question.

He asked it in Spanish, in a very small voice, and I will tell you it in English, because it is the same question in any language.

Where did Papá go?

And I told him the truth. I had known it once, when I was seven, and then I had spent thirteen years believing something else. But I knew it now, sitting in that corner, and I said it out loud, for the first time in my life.

"He was coming home," I said. "He was trying to get back to us. The whole time. He didn't leave. He was coming home."

The boy did not say anything. He cried. Not the way my mother had screamed. The way a child cries when someone finally tells him something true, and it is terrible, and it is also a relief, because now at least it is known, and can be carried.

And I cried too. Where I was, in the corner of that room. And on the tape, on a carpet in Los Angeles, a young man with his hands full of

nothing is crying again, and a frat brother named Danny Reyes is kneeling next to him with one hand on his back, not saying anything at all, because he does not know what else to do, and because it is exactly the right thing.

Minute 13:40. Then the boy asked me the other question.

He lifted his head off my arm and looked up at me, with those serious eyes, in the dark.

Where did the rest of me go?

And I knew the answer to that one too.

"Aquí [ah-KEE]," I said. Here.

I said it again. *Aquí.* Here. Here. The rest of you is here. It went north, and it grew up, and it forgot you, and it came back. It is sitting next to you. It is holding the leaves. *Aquí.*

Minute 14:15. I have to tell you what happened next, and I will not pretend it was more than it was.

The boy did not disappear. Nothing flashed. No music played. He did not turn into light, or melt into me, or any of the things that happen in films.

He leaned against me. That is all. The way a tired child leans against a grown-up at the end of a long day, all his weight at once, trusting that he will be held up. He leaned, and I held him up. And his weight was the weight of a seven-year-old, and it was also the weight of the leaves in my hands, and it was also a weight I could feel in my own chest, heavy and warm, where for two years there had been nothing at all.

And the room began, very slowly, to come apart.

Minute 15:30. Coming back was the reverse of leaving, and it took much longer.

The walls of the room did not fold. They thinned. Like fog lifting off a field in the morning, the wooden boards and the saints on the shelf and the mat and my mother and my grandmother grew paler and paler, and through them, behind them, the way you see the

street through a net curtain, I began to see Danny's bedroom. The beige wall. The poster. The broken futon on its dictionary.

For a long time I was in both places at once. I do not mean that I went back and forth. I mean that both were there, laid one on top of the other, like two photographs printed on the same page. My hands were on a dirt floor and on a nylon carpet. I could smell wood smoke and cold pizza. The rain on the tin roof and the bass through the floorboards were one sound, the same beat. My grandmother's candle and the lamp on Danny's desk were one light.

Minute 18:05. The colors came back into their places, the way the bands on the barber's pole would, if it ever stopped turning. The yellow went back into the lighter. The green went back into Danny's T-shirt. The pink went back into my own hands.

The lines of the room straightened, one at a time, like a sheet of paper unrolled and pressed flat under a book. The ceiling went back up. The floor went back down. The corners of the room, which had joined up behind me in the place no eyes can see, came apart again, politely, and went back to being corners.

The hum stopped. I heard it stop. It is the only time in my life I have ever heard a silence begin.

Minute 22:40. The boy was the last thing to go.

The room faded, and my mother and my grandmother faded, and the kitchen beyond the doorway faded, and the blue door, and the village, and the river. And the boy was still there, beside me, leaning, with his head on my arm, getting fainter and fainter the way a star gets fainter when the sky behind it gets light, until I could not tell whether I could see him or only remember seeing him.

I did not want to let him go. I understood then that I did not have to. That was the point. He was not going anywhere. He was not being left behind this time. He was coming with me. Nobody had to carry him. He had been carried.

Minute 27:15. The red light was there.

I saw it before I saw anything else clearly. One small round red light, perfectly still, on top of two chemistry textbooks on a desk in a bedroom in a fraternity house in Los Angeles. It had been there the whole time. It had watched everything. It had not moved.

I looked at it for a long time, the way you look at a lighthouse from a boat, and I thought, very clearly, the plainest thought I had had since I breathed in: *I am still here.*

And then: *All of me.*

Minute 31:00. Danny's face, very close. His eyes were red. He had been crying too, I think, though he has never said so and I will never ask.

"Hey," he said. "Hey, man. You back?"

I nodded. My mouth was very dry. My hands were still cupped together in my lap, and I found that I did not want to open them, as if something might fall out.

"Where did you go?" Danny said. "Seriously. Where were you?"

I opened my mouth to tell him.

And I could not. I want you to understand that I tried. I tried to find the first word, and there wasn't one. There was a dirt floor and a scream and a telephone that did not ring and a boy in a white shirt, and a whole night, and thirteen years, and none of it would go into a sentence. It was like trying to pour a river into a cup. The cup was the wrong shape, and the river kept going.

"I can't say it," I said. "I'm sorry. I can't say this."

Danny nodded, as if that were a perfectly good answer. And then he said, "Plus four?"

And I laughed, and it hurt, and I said, "Plus four. I don't want a refund."

Minute 34:10. And that is where the tape ends.

On the little screen on my knees there is a young man sitting on a carpet with his back against a bed, and a friend beside him with a hand on his shoulder, and they are both looking at the camera, and

the young man lifts his cupped hands a little toward the lens, as if to show it what is in them. And then Danny reaches out, and the picture tips sideways, and goes black.

The counter stops at thirty-four minutes and ten seconds.

I have watched it all the way through now. I will tell you the one thing I did not know, until I watched it, and could not have known.

From about fourteen minutes in, after the young man on the carpet has picked up every leaf that is not there, he is saying one word. Over and over, for twenty minutes. Quietly, not to anyone in the room. In Spanish, in a voice that none of his friends has ever heard him use, a soft mountain voice that comes from a little further back in the throat.

Aquí.

Aquí.

Aquí.

Here.

After. It is ten o'clock on Sunday morning, and I have put the camera down on the bed.

My coffee has gone cold. I drank it anyway. I want to tell you that it tasted of something, and it did. It tasted of cold coffee, bitter and a bit burnt, and I tasted all of it, every mouthful, the way I have not tasted anything for two years. That is not a cure. I know that. The doctor's word has not gone anywhere, and neither have the pills, and I am going to go back and see her on Tuesday and tell her some of this, the parts I can say. The leaf did not fix anything. It is a plant. It opened a door that I had nailed shut, and showed me what was on the other side, and then it let me go.

But I know where the lost piece is now. That is not the same as having it back. My grandmother would say it is the only place to start.

So I am going to do the next thing. It is Sunday. For a long time, Sunday was the day the phone rang.

After. I have called my mother.

She answered on the second ring, the way she always does, as if she has been sitting by the phone. I did not tell her about the party, or the leaf, or the tape. I did not accuse her of anything. I understand now what she did, and why, and I think I would have done the same.

I asked her one question.

"Mamá," I said, "where is my father buried?"

There was a silence on the line. A long one. The longest silence I have ever heard from my mother, who fills every silence. I could hear the television in the background, and a car going by outside her window, and her breathing.

And then my mother began to cry. Not the scream. Something much quieter, and much older, that had been waiting thirteen years for somebody to ask. It was the first time in my life I had heard her cry.

When she could talk, she said: "In the village. Next to your grandmother. She buried him there, the winter after we left. I sent the money for the stone." And then, after a while: "I always meant to take you. I didn't know how to start."

"I know," I said. "Neither did I."

We were quiet for a while. It was not an empty quiet. It was the other kind.

Then she said, the way she has said it at the end of every phone call since I left home, "*¿Dónde estás, mijo* [MEE-hoh]?" *Where are you, son?*

And I said, "*Aquí, Mamá.*"

Here.

WHAT IT DID

Salvia divinorum, the leaf of the Shepherdess. **Grown.** A plant of the mint family, known only from the mountains of the Sierra Mazateca in Oaxaca, Mexico. **Door:** leaving the body.

How it was taken in this book. Once, as a concentrated extract sold in a smoke shop, breathed in from a glass pipe. Not the traditional way, which is to chew the fresh leaves slowly, at night, in darkness and silence, with someone watching.

How long. It began within seconds. The strongest part lasted a few minutes. By about half an hour it was over. Inside, it felt far longer.

What it did to time. Time came loose. A few real minutes held what felt like a whole night, and thirteen years.

What it did to the body. He lost it. He became a flat surface, part of a wall. His body, left behind, laughed, cried, stood up and walked toward a window, and was stopped by a friend.

What it did to the self. He met a boy, and learned that the boy was himself: the part of him left behind at seven, on the night his father's death was spoken aloud.

What it did to the world. Colors separated and were felt as warmth and cold. Straight lines bent. The room rolled up and turned like a wheel, then like the pages of a book. A low hum under everything. Then a kitchen in the mountains, and a room he had not let himself remember.

What it meant. He felt that something true was being shown to him. The leaf did not know anything or cure anything. It opened a door he had nailed shut.

What it did not do. It did not heal him. The next morning he was still the person with the doctor's word and the pills. He knew where the lost piece was. That is not the same as having it back.

On the strength scale made by the chemist Alexander Shulgin: *plus four*, the rare kind that cannot be described and may never come again.

THE MAPMAKER

For Daniel Siebert (1963-2024)

In 1993, in Southern California, a young man sat down to find out whether a white powder could open a door.

The powder was *salvinorin A* [sal-vih-NOR-in AY], a substance taken out of the leaves of *Salvia divinorum*. Chemists in Mexico had first separated it from the leaf in 1982, and another team had found it again two years later. They knew it was there. What nobody knew was whether it was the thing in the leaf that did the work. For thirty years, ever since the first outsiders had come down the mountain with the leaf in 1962, scientists had tried to find the part of it that took the mind somewhere else, and failed. The Swiss chemist Albert Hofmann, who had found so many other doors, had tried and failed. The juice he had carried home from Mexico had lost its power. The door stayed closed.

Daniel Siebert was an ethnobotanist, someone who studies how people use plants, and a careful, curious man who had spent years growing the leaf and learning everything the Mazatec healers and the handful of scientists who had visited them had written down. He had a small amount of the pure substance, and a question, and the courage, or the curiosity, to answer it the only way it could be answered then.

He tried a tiny amount of it on himself, with friends watching over him. Within seconds, the room was gone.

He published what he had found in June 1994, in the *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, under a plain title: *Salvia divinorum and salvinorin A: new pharmacologic findings* (volume 43, pages 53-56). It was the first proof that this one substance, and not something else, was the key in the leaf. And it showed something no one had expected: that it was extraordinarily strong. Amounts too small to see were enough. By weight, it was the most powerful mind-changing substance known to grow anywhere in nature.

That was the beginning of everything else. Once the key was known, scientists could go looking for the lock. In 2002, a team led by the American pharmacologist Bryan Roth found it: a lock in the brain that no plant like this had ever been known to touch, the *kappa-opioid receptor*. The leaf had shown the scientists a door in the mind they had not known was there.

Siebert spent the rest of his life on the leaf. He started a centre for information about it, and helped publish a guide for people who were going to take it anyway, which put safety first: have a sober sitter with you, put away anything dangerous, lie down, never drive. He talked to newspapers and television when the videos began to spread, and asked people to understand what the plant was before they banned it or bought it. In 2002 he spoke against a bill in the United States Congress that would have made the leaf illegal everywhere in the country. He believed it should be respected, not feared, and not sold as a joke. He died in 2024.

This book is dedicated to him, because he was the first person to know for certain what was in the leaf that opened the door, and because he spent the rest of his life asking people to be careful with it.

The people around him

No one maps a place alone. These are the others who drew parts of this map, in the order they arrived.

The Mazatec healers of the Sierra Mazateca. Before anyone wrote anything down, they kept the leaf, grew it by hand, and sat with it in the dark to ask where the sick and the lost had gone. Everything in this book rests on what they knew first. Many of them are nameless in the record, and some of what they know is theirs and is not written here.

Jean Bassett Johnson, an anthropologist, who in the late 1930s recorded that the Mazatec used a tea of leaves they called *hierba María* to see and to divine — the first outsider to write it down.

Blas Pablo Reko, an Austrian doctor and naturalist, who in 1945 described a magical leaf that brought visions, used in these mountains.

R. Gordon Wasson, a New York banker who spent his life studying sacred mushrooms and plants, who first took the leaf in the Mazatec mountains on 12 July 1961 and wrote about it.

Anita and Albert Hofmann. The Swiss chemist who first made LSD came to the mountains with his wife in October 1962. In the village of San José Tenango, Anita Hofmann and Wasson sat with the healer Consuelo García and took the leaf; Albert, ill that night, took it later on the same journey. They carried the juice home to Basel, kept in alcohol, and when they tested it there it no longer worked.

Carl Epling and Carlos Játiva, the botanists who, from the leaves Wasson and Hofmann sent them, named the plant a new species in December 1962: *Salvia divinorum*, the sage of the diviners.

Alfredo Ortega and his colleagues, who first separated salvinorin from the leaf in 1982, and **Leander Valdés III** and his colleagues, who found it again in 1984 and spent years recording how the Mazatec used the leaf.

Bryan Roth and his team, who in 2002 found the lock it fits.

Terence McKenna, who described his own first meeting with the leaf in an interview with Charles Hayes, recorded in January 1998 and published in *Tripping: An Anthology of True-Life Psychedelic Adventures* (Penguin Compass, 2000).

- Jean Bassett Johnson, report on Mazatec divination with *hierba María*, late 1930s; as recorded in L. J. Valdés III, *The early history of Salvia divinorum*, and the Erowid *Salvia divinorum* timeline.
- Blas Pablo Reko, 1945; as above.
- R. G. Wasson, *A new Mexican psychotropic drug from the mint family*, Botanical Museum Leaflets, Harvard University 20 (1962).
- Albert Hofmann, *LSD: My Problem Child* (1979; English 1980), chapter 6: the 1962 journey, the ceremony at San José Tenango, and the juice that no longer worked in Basel.
- C. Epling and C. D. Játiva-M., the naming of *Salvia divinorum*, Botanical Museum Leaflets, Harvard University 20 (1962).

- A. Ortega et al. (1982), and L. J. Valdés III et al. (1984): the isolation of salvinorin.
- D. J. Siebert, *Salvia divinorum and salvinorin A: new pharmacologic findings*, Journal of Ethnopharmacology 43 (1994): 53–56.
- B. L. Roth et al., *Salvinorin A: a potent naturally occurring nonnitrogenous κ opioid selective agonist*, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 99 (2002).
- C. Hayes, ed., *Tripping: An Anthology of True-Life Psychedelic Adventures* (Penguin Compass, 2000), interview with Terence McKenna, recorded January 1998.
- The *Salvia divinorum* User's Guide (Sage Student, with Daniel Siebert, 2000), safety guidelines.
- Louisiana Act No. 159 (2005); Delaware Senate Bill 259, "Brett's Law" (2006); California AB 259 (2007–2008).

GLOSSARY

Abuela [ah-BWEH-lah] — Spanish, *grandmother*. What Tomás calls his grandmother.

Aquí [ah-KEE] — Spanish, *here*. The word Tomás says over and over on the tape.

Callimachus [kuh-LIM-uh-kus] — A Greek poet of the third century BC, whose *Hymn to Delos* tells why the island got its name.

Delos [DEE-los] — Greek, *clear, visible*. A small island in the Aegean Sea; in the old story, it drifted unseen until it gave shelter to a goddess, and was then fixed in place and named *the one that can be seen*. The second half of the word *psychedelic*.

Diviner — English, *one who divines*. A person who finds hidden things, or foresees what is coming, by means that are not ordinary. The *divinorum* in the plant's Latin name means *of the diviners*.

Hic sunt dracones [HEEK soont drah-KOH-nays] — Latin, *here are dragons*. Written on one small globe of about 1510 at the edge of the known world.

Hic sunt leones [HEEK soont lay-OH-nays] — Latin, *here are lions*. What old mapmakers wrote on lands they did not know.

Kappa-opioid receptor [KAP-uh OH-pee-oyd rih-SEP-ter] — the lock in the brain that salvinorin A fits. One member of a family of locks that the key in opium also belongs to, though opium fits a different member. Found to be salvia's lock in 2002.

Mazatec [MAH-zah-tek] — An Indigenous people of the mountains of northern Oaxaca, in southern Mexico, with their own language, older than Spanish there. The keepers of the leaf.

Mijo [MEE-hoh] — Spanish, *my son*, from *mi hijo*. A loving way for a parent to speak to a child.

Nitrogen [NY-truh-jen] — One of the ordinary building blocks of living things. Nearly every mind-changing plant studied before this one has it in its key. This one does not.

Oaxaca [wah-HAH-kah] — A state in the south of Mexico, high and mountainous, where the leaf grows.

Papá [pah-PAH] — Spanish, *dad*.

Psyche [SY-kee] — Greek, *mind, soul*. The first half of the word *psychedelic*.

Receptor [rih-SEP-ter] — English, from Latin, *receiver*. A tiny shape on the outside of a cell that receives a particular key and switches something on or off.

Salvia divinorum [SAL-vee-ah dih-vih-NOR-um] — Latin, *sage of the diviners*. A plant of the mint family from the Sierra Mazateca, which almost never makes seed and lives because people carry cuttings by hand. Its leaves change the mind.

Salvinorin [sal-vih-NOR-in] — also *salvinorin A*. The substance in the leaf that does the work. First separated in 1982; shown to be active in 1993 by Daniel Siebert.

Sierra Mazateca [see-EH-rah mah-sah-TEH-kah] — Spanish, *the Mazatec mountains*. The mountains of northern Oaxaca where the Mazatec live and the leaf grows wild.

Ska María Pastora [SKAH mah-REE-ah pahs-TOH-rah] — Mazatec and Spanish, *leaf of Mary the Shepherdess*. The Mazatec name for the leaf (*ska*, leaf, in Mazatec).

Susto [SOOS-toh] — Spanish, *fright*. In Mexican and Central American healing, an illness caused by a great fright, in which a piece of the soul falls out of the body and stays where it fell. The person goes on living, but sad, sleepless and empty, until a healer finds the place and calls the piece home.

Vamos a buscar [BAH-mohs ah boos-KAR] — Spanish, *let's go and look*.

Ya llegaste [yah yeh-GAHS-teh] — Spanish, *you've come, you're here at last*.

Los Angeles, April 2007. Tomás is twenty years old, and for two years he has felt nothing at all.

A doctor has given it a name. The pills make the flatness quieter. They do not make it go away.

On a Saturday night at a fraternity party, his friend Danny holds up a small printed bag from a smoke shop on the boulevard. People say it takes the mind to the strangest place it can go. Tomás says yes.

He makes Danny promise to stay sober and hold the camera. The counter starts at zero. The last thing he sees before the room folds shut is the small red light on the front of it.

On the other side there is a dirt floor, rain on a tin roof, and a barefoot boy counting leaves in the dark.

*The boy has lost something.
He needs help to find it.*

