

A REPORT ON OUR RECENT TROUBLES

We have completed our preliminary investigation and hereby submit our report to the Committee.

For nearly six months our town has suffered events that threaten its very existence. Entire families have moved away, in the hope of finding relief in other towns, only to discover that they cannot escape what some have called a curse, others a fatality; we ourselves prefer less colorful forms of speech. Those of us who remain have attempted to go about our business as if nothing has changed, while knowing that everything has changed. The very expressions on our faces have altered. Even the smiles of our children are no longer the old smiles, but betray an air of exaggeration, of willed cheerfulness. On block after block we see the empty houses, the untended lawns. Cats scratch at screen doors that never open. Large groups of townsfolk gather in vacant lots at dusk, as if for a purpose, only to drift away. Under such conditions, who can speak? We who dare to hope, we who are in the thick of things but try to stand apart, in order to grasp the ungraspable—we have taken it upon ourselves to trace the history of these aberrations and to discover their secret cause.

For as long as anyone can remember, our town has been a pleasant place to live in. Situated at the far end of the commuter line, we enjoy the sense of a vital connection to the larger world, as well as a satisfying sense of self-exclusion from that world, of communal separation for the sake of our own way of life. Here, we preserve touches of an older, more rural America. The north woods, the stream with its railed wooden bridge, the Indian burial ground—such retreats coexist peacefully with our train station, our six-lane thruway, and our new microchip plant. Here, the streets are shady, the houses in good repair, the backyards bright with swing sets, lawn chairs, and round cedar tables under broad umbrellas. In Sterling Park, our children play baseball on a diamond with real bases, a pitcher's mound with a pitcher's rubber, and a chain-link backstop, while our dogs lie down, beside slatted benches, in stripes of sun and shade. Of course, like other towns, we have our share of troubles, we're only human. But on the whole we are happy to be here, where the sky has always seemed a little bluer, the leaves a little greener, than in other towns we know.

Was there a turn, a change in the atmosphere? To single out a particular moment is to distort the record, for it suggests a clear history of cause and effect that can only betray our sense of what really happened. We can nevertheless agree that something began to reveal itself in March of this year, about six months ago. At that time three incidents occurred, apparently unrelated, which made a strong impression on the town without seeming to point in a direction. The first was the death by suicide of Richard and Suzanne Lowry, of 451 Greenwood Road. The Lowrys were in their early fifties, rich, healthy, happily married, with a wide circle of friends. They left no note. The police investigation uncovered no secret, no mistress or lover, no illness, no problem of any kind, and it was above all the absence of a motive that disturbed and finally angered a good many of us, who blamed the Lowrys not simply for throwing their lives away but for leaving us with an impenetrable mystery. There was some unpleasant

talk among us that they did it in order to spite us, to show us that they needed no one and nothing. Although this explanation struck most of us as petty and malicious, we took it as a sign of the dissatisfaction we all felt, a testament to our irritable unforgiveness.

Two weeks later came the news of Carl Schneider, a seventy-four-year-old retired high-school geometry teacher who had been diagnosed with cancer of the liver. His death, by his own hand, attracted less attention than the Lowry deaths, though we were all aware of it and felt secretly thankful to Mr. Schneider for providing us with a reasonable suicide, some would say an admirable suicide, one that we could readily understand. In this sense the two incidents, which had nothing to do with each other, were connected in our minds. We also noted that in an interview in the *Town Ledger*, Schneider's forty-six-year-old daughter said that her father had read about the Lowrys and had mentioned them during a visit. In a small town, someone remarked at the time, it's difficult to kill yourself without word getting around.

Four days after the death of Carl Schneider, two high school juniors, Ryan Whittaker and Diane Grabowski, were discovered in the basement playroom of the Whittaker house, lying side by side on the daybed near the Ping-Pong table. The cause of death was bullet wounds to the head from two handguns, both owned by the boy's father. A note was found, pinned to the young man's polo shirt, written in his hand but signed by both teenagers and addressed to both sets of parents. In it they apologized for any distress their action might cause and stated that they died willingly by their own hand as a way of affirming their love and celebrating it forever in death. The note had a self-conscious, literary tone that we found exasperating and touching in equal measure, but what stuck in our throats was the fact that our town had experienced five suicides in less than a month.

It might have been left at that—a dark month, a run of bad luck—if it hadn't been for an incident that took place in early April. George

Sabol, a high school sophomore, and Nancy Martins, a ninth-grader, were found by police on a blanket in the woods behind the Sabol house. This time there was a single gun—a .38 Smith & Wesson semiautomatic—but the suicide note revealed that the plan was for Nancy Martins to fire the first shot, into her left temple, after which George Sabol would fire a shot into his own left temple. The note, printed from Sabol's computer and signed in ink by both students, spoke of their undying love and the eternal bond of death. The written statement and the weapon made it evident that Sabol and Martins had patterned their deaths after the double suicide of Whittaker and Grabowski, and it was this unmistakable connection that first sent a ripple of alarm through our town. Fathers began to lock their guns away, mothers followed their sons and daughters anxiously from room to room; the high school expanded its counseling program and urged people to come forward with any information concerning unusual behavior. In the night we began to wake suddenly, our hands tense against the sheets.

Scarcely had we had a chance to absorb the deaths of George Sabol and Nancy Martins when we were confronted with another incident, more troubling still. The morning paper reported that three groups of high school students—two, two, and three—had been found dead, in three different homes; all three groups left suicide notes modeled on the ones we knew. It was also reported that five of the seven students belonged to the Black Rose, a secret association devoted to the cause of Meaningful Death. A stapled handbook, printed on purple Xerox paper, was discovered in the bedroom of one dead boy; from it we learned that members of the Black Rose were encouraged to give meaning to their lives by choosing their own death. Suicide was praised as a celebratory act, which transformed the drift and emptiness of ordinary life into the certainty of choice: to choose death was to impose a design on randomness. What disturbed us wasn't so much the danger or incoherence of such ideas as their very existence. The

next day two more deaths were reported, in different neighborhoods; a page torn from a handbook of the Black Rose was found in the pocketbook of one victim. It was now that we began to take the car keys away, to impose strict curfews, to keep our cell phones on at all times. In the houses of our town, unease drifted like smoke.

At this period we felt that if only we could put an end to the Black Rose, we could also put an end to the sickly fashion for death that had seized our sons and daughters. In this sense, though we hated and feared the Black Rose, we also clung to it, in a way were grateful to it, since it provided us with the hidden reason we desperately sought. Our teenagers were in the grip of a morbid philosophy—a decadent dogma—which had inspired a fatal game. We would fight a battle to win back the minds of our children, we would hurl ourselves against the forces of darkness with weapons of the sun. It was true that not every death could be traced to the Black Rose; there was even some evidence that membership was confined to a small circle of fanatics. But just as we felt we were getting to the heart of things, a new turn unsettled us—for it seemed that the Black Rose had already been left behind, while new seductions emerged with disquieting ease.

A passion for spectacular suicide now seized our sons and daughters. It was as if they had begun to vie with one another for the most memorable death. One group of six high school students, visiting a nearby amusement park, rode the roller coaster and were found dead at the end of the ride; all six had injected themselves on the way up the track with a solution of potassium chloride. None of the six was in any way connected with the Black Rose. Joanne Garavaglia, a popular girl with a passion for home video, went up to her attic one night and filmed herself as she raised a bone-handled hunting knife and plunged it into her throat. Lorraine Keating hanged herself at dusk from the branch of a hickory tree in front of a group of admiring friends. The fad for suicide notes had already been replaced by a taste for terse, obscure messages, such as “Never Enough” and

“Evermore,” while the act of dying became an increasingly elaborate art, discussed and evaluated in high school hallways and behind the locked doors of bedrooms bathed in afternoon sunlight.

Young teenage girls were especially susceptible to the new trend for eye-catching death. It was seen as a way of drawing the right kind of attention to yourself, of making yourself stand out from the crowd. A popular girl, by means of a well-staged death, could become more popular still; an unpopular girl could break free from her isolation and loneliness in the short space of a single magnificent gesture. Jane Franklin was a quiet girl who walked the halls alone. On the night of the spring dance, she pulled on a pair of black jeans and a black hooded sweatshirt, climbed to the top of the water tower behind the chemical plant, and set herself on fire. Two days later Christine Jacobson, a blond cheerleader and co-captain of the girls’ swim team, walked to the front of her English class, raised a dark object slowly with both hands, and shot herself in the center of the forehead.

Even as the epidemic of suicide raged through our high school, we noticed that its effects were being felt in two opposite directions: upward, in the colleges where our older sons and daughters were finishing their spring semester, and downward, in the William Barnes Middle School and our six elementary schools. A college junior who had graduated from our high school fastened a pair of satin-covered foam angel wings to his shoulders and leaped to his death from the top of the astronomy building; a college sophomore painted the word “luminosity” in neon-green letters on the side of her car, drove through a guardrail on the outskirts of her rural campus, and sailed into the air above a much-photographed ravine. Four seventh-graders were found in a stand of spruce between two backyards after they had swallowed rat poison dissolved in cherry Kool-Aid. Howard Dietz, a fourth-grader, pried open his father’s gun cabinet one day after school and, sitting on the edge of his bed, opened his mouth, placed the barrel of a twenty-gauge shotgun between his teeth, which had

recently been fitted with braces decorated with metallic-blue brackets, and pulled the trigger. One group of sixth-grade girls initiated a brief vogue: wearing jean shorts, bathing-suit tops, and bright red lipstick, they dragged a barbecue grill into a backyard toolshed, shut the door, and inhaled the fatal fumes of charcoal briquettes. We held town meetings, consulted with crisis counselors and family therapists, engaged in lengthy discussions with our children. We dreaded opening the morning paper.

What haunted us, apart from the deaths themselves, was the spirit in which the perpetrators appeared to seek their own destruction. For it was difficult to deny that a majority of deaths were chosen in a mood of adventure, of high daring, even of exhilaration. Here and there, to be sure, an adolescent boy rejected by his girlfriend swallowed a fistful of barbiturates, a depressed girl who felt unloved slipped into a tub of warm water and slit her wrists. These deaths were in some sense comforting, almost pleasing, for we could imagine ourselves, under similar circumstances, arriving at the same decision. But what were we to make of the atmosphere of excitement evident among the others, their sense of embracing the unknown with something like fervor? Death as a spirited game, death as a challenge, as an intriguing art form, an expression of originality—this death was something we knew nothing about, we who understood what it meant to wake in the night with dread in our hearts.

Excitements falter. Fads fade away. Although we were dazed with exhaustion and anxiety, we remained stubbornly hopeful, for we knew that crises of adolescence do not last. And in fact the school suicides began to diminish, without actually coming to an end. At the same time we were unable to ignore new signs of trouble. It happened here and there—a marriage suicide, the suicide of a young mother. We understood, with a kind of rage, that the same parents who listened to their sons' rock bands and imitated their daughters' styles in hip-hugger jeans and spaghetti-strap tank tops were not immune to

the latest craze. As the deaths spread among the adults of our town, we began to hear talk of the Blue Iris, an association all too clearly inspired by the Black Rose but with a crucial difference. Whereas the Black Rose promoted suicide as a method of imposing a design on the randomness of life, the Blue Iris spoke of death as the culminating moment of existence—the climactic event to which every life aspired. Precisely for this reason, death should be chosen at a moment of fulfillment. We began to hear of sexual suicides, ingeniously enacted at the height of lovemaking. Couples began to look to death as an erotic stimulus, a mechanism for ultimate release, as though they were seeking, in the act of self-murder, a cosmic orgasm. Others chose different moments of heightened feeling: a wedding ceremony, a longed-for promotion, a sudden eruption of irrational happiness. We took note of these suicides with a certain disdain, for they seemed too closely modeled on a fading teenage fashion, while at the same time they made our blood tremble. The new suicides were our neighbors; they were ourselves.

Frank and Rita Sorensen were a handsome couple in their late thirties, with the sort of marriage many of us envied. He was a real estate developer who had brought a new recreational center to the west end of town, she was an interior decorator who had improved many of our kitchens and dens. They seemed a happier, more talented, more successful version of ourselves. They lived with their two young daughters, Sigrid and Belle, in a big house on Roland Terrace, where we were present at their summer barbecues and winter dinner parties. We knew the sound of their laughter, the energy of their glances, we could feel the easy flow of affection between them. Although they were happy, in a way that was impossible to doubt, it's true that we could feel in them, at times, a shadow of disappointment, a ripple of disenchantment, of a kind that struck us as familiar, for their lives, like ours, were in a certain manner complete, they could look forward to years of pleasure and success and laudable accomplishment but to

nothing more—it was as if, somewhere along the way, they had misplaced a youthful sense of discovery, a sense that life is an adventure that might lead to anything on earth. Like us, they accepted their happiness without thinking much about it; like ours, their happiness was complicated by another feeling that wasn't sorrow but that closed in on them from time to time. One day they joined the Blue Iris. We noticed at once their new zest, their new seriousness. They attended meetings, invited us to lakeshore cookouts and Friday night pool parties, drank hard, laughed with their heads thrown back, passed the crab dip. One night they retired to their bedroom, lay down on their bed fully clothed, raised their matching pistols with ivory-inlaid rosewood grips, and shot themselves in the head. A typed note in a sealed envelope explained that they were fully conscious of what they were doing and, more in love than ever, chose to complete their lives on a crest of happiness. They urged others to join them in this act of fulfillment.

Some accused the Sorensens of harboring a dark secret, but for most of us the tone of the note was all too familiar. Others blamed the Blue Iris, which they attacked as a false religion, a satanic cult dedicated to the corruption of the will to live. Those of us who had laughed late into the night with the Sorensens said nothing, for we saw in their deaths still another sign that our town had lost its way.

Indeed, it's often difficult to recall a more innocent time, when we cheerfully planned birthday parties for our children and looked forward to family picnics on shady redwood tables beside the stream. We have grown accustomed to the daily suicide reports, the weekly death counts—sometimes high, sometimes low—now a lull, now a flare-up—here a bachelor in his leather recliner in front of the flat-screen TV, there a group of close-knit friends in cushioned chaises around the swimming pool. On nearly every block, a house has been struck. People approaching one another on the sidewalk shift their eyes suddenly, thinking: Will he be next? Despite it all, we manage to

carry on, as if we don't know what else there might be to do. The daily paper continues to land on front porches, even of abandoned houses. Children skip rope. Hedge-trimmers buzz. Lawn mowers sound in the air of summer.

In such a world, people seek answers. Some say we're being punished for the way we live—the casual adulteries, the heavy drinking, the high divorce rate, the sexual promiscuity among our teenagers, the violent visual culture among our children. Others, while rejecting the punishment hypothesis as a throwback to moribund theological systems, nevertheless claim that our town has carried certain forms of behavior to their logical conclusion, for a culture based on material pleasures must necessarily lead to an embrace of the ultimate material fact, which is death. Still others, dismissing this argument as a secular version of the theological critique, insist that our town represents a new, healthy attitude toward the conduct of life: disdaining evasion, we bravely face the truth of our mortality.

For our part, while honoring the sincerity of these explanations, we believe the truth lies elsewhere. The behavior of our citizens, though far from perfect, is surely no worse than one finds in other suburban towns. And we take special pride in seeing to it that our town is an ideal place for raising children. Our school system is first-rate, our three parks well cared for, our neighborhoods safe. Visitors from other towns praise our shady residential streets, lined with sugar maples, lindens, and sycamores; they comment on our friendly and welcoming Main Street with its outdoor cafés, its array of ice cream shops and exotic restaurants housed in carefully preserved nineteenth-century buildings with arched windows outlined by stone moldings. Even the older houses in our blue-collar neighborhoods, south of the railroad tracks, display well-mowed lawns and fresh-painted shingles, on streets lined with broad porches. How then do we explain this eruption of wished-for death, this plague of self-annihilation?

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The answer, we have concluded, lies not in our failure to live up

to a high code of conduct—not in the realm of failure at all—but in the very qualities of our town that we think of as deserving praise. By this we don't mean to suggest that our town is a sham, that beneath our well-groomed surface is a hidden darkness—a rot at the heart of things. Such an explanation we find naïve, even childish. It suggests that by the simple act of tearing off a mask we can expose the hideous truth beneath—a truth that, once revealed, will no longer have the power to harm us. Such an analysis strikes us as banal and consoling. Our town, we maintain, is in fact the excellent place we've always found it to be. It is precisely the nature of this excellence that we wish to examine more closely.

Those who admire our town speak of it as pleasant, safe, comfortable, attractive, and friendly. It is all these things. But such qualities, however worthwhile, contain an element of the questionable. At their heart lies an absence. It's an absence of all that is not pleasant, all that is uncomfortable, dangerous, unknown. By its very nature, that is to say, our town represents a banishment. But the act of banishment implies an awareness of the very thing that is banished. It is this awareness, we maintain, that breeds a secret sympathy for all that is not reassuring. Surfeited with contentment, weighed down by happiness, our citizens feel, now and then, a sudden desire: for the unseen, for the forbidden. Beneath or within our town, a counter-town arises—a dark town devoted to the disruption of limits, a town in love with death.

Severe illnesses demand severe remedies. We propose that the Committee insert into our town the things we have kept out. We suggest a return to public hangings, on the hill behind the high school. We support gladiatorial contests between men and maddened pit bulls. We recommend the restoration of outlawed forms of public punishment, such as stoning and flaying. We advise a return to the stake, to fire and blood. We ask that once a year a child be chosen by lot and ritually murdered on the green before the town hall, as a reminder to our citizens that we walk on the bones of the dead.

Our town has been emptied of darkness, robbed of death. There is nothing left for us but brightness, clarity, and order. Our citizens are killing themselves because their passion for what's missing has nowhere else to go.

We urge the Committee to consider our recommendations with the utmost seriousness. Anything less than a violent response to our crisis will certainly fail. Some say that it is already too late, that our town is heading for extinction. We, on the contrary, hold out an anxious hope. But we must act. Already the disease has begun to spread to other towns—here and there, in nearby places, we read of extravagant suicides, of deaths that cannot be accounted for in the usual way.

We who have studied these matters, we who have pursued our investigations into the darkest corners of our minds, are not ourselves exempt from stray imaginings. On warm spring evenings, when dusk settles over our houses like a promise of something we dare not remember, or on blue summer nights when we step from the shadows of porches into the brightness of the moon, we feel a stirring, a restless desire, as if we were missing something we had thought would be there. Then we take firm hold of ourselves, we set our jaws and turn back, for we know where these flickers of feeling can take us. And perhaps what is happening in our town is simply this, that a familiar flicker, of no harm in itself, has been allowed to develop without impediment, that our citizens have become gifted in the dark art of not holding back. For at that moment, before we turn away, we too have seen the distant figure beckon, we too have heard the black wings beating in the brain.

Respectfully submitted to the Committee by the undersigned, this seventeenth day of September.