

The Haunted

Jessie H. Cochran

DO YOU remember how long the summer afternoons were when you were a kid? Full of sun and torpor and endlessness, and a drowsiness that was at the same time sort of stimulating. I think of them horizontally, because that's how we usually were, Dan and I, flopped somewhere in the shade, talking, almost always at my house. All the other boys we knew had summer jobs, but I wasn't considered strong enough; I'd had rheumatic fever a couple of years before. I must have been stronger than Dan, though, looking back. He was a skinny kid, not wiry-skinny but frail-skinny, and he kept one shoulder hunched up, defensively, like a boxer about to deliver a right cross, even though he couldn't have hurt a fly with that promised punch. He had the worst skin I've ever seen on anybody and was, of course, sensitive about it. Close as we were all that summer, talking as much as we did, that was the one subject we never discussed. I guess that was the reason Dan liked me; he must have felt I was nice not to say something about his skin like all the other kids did.

Dan didn't work because he didn't want to, and nobody cared whether he did or not. His father was an archeologist and was always away on field trips, God knows where, and his mother drank all day long, which left Dan pretty free. Some of his old man's culture must have seeped down through the genes, because he was on a philosophy kick that summer. His schedule ran pretty much like this: stay up until about three in the morning reading, eat something out of the icebox, go to bed and sleep until noon and then come over to my house. Sometimes he'd be pretty excited about what he'd just read, like the time he came bursting in shouting "Cogito, ergo sum!" He thought he had the answer to the Big Question, until he switched to Nietzsche. He switched around a lot (he said it was "healthy eclecticism"), and the week he discovered the Stoics his skin cleared up a little. But then he ran across Epicurus and, munching on a Baby Ruth, told me pontifically that "the beginning and the root of all good is the pleasure of the stomach; even wisdom and culture must be referred to this." That did it, and his face blossomed again in its old accustomed way.

So, lying around bored and hot, with the sudden spasms of exuberance you have when you're fifteen or so, we passed through the hot, smelly, sunny, leafy tunnel of summer. I was glad of Dan's company, and was pretty sure I was the only friend he had. It never occurred to me that he might want to talk to someone else, until the afternoon he came strolling over, with that curious little shuffling gait and his shoulder hunched up, carrying the Want Ad section of the morning paper.

"Look at this," he said, sprawling on the glider and thrusting the

paper at me.

"What?"

"I've marked it, that ad right there. Read it."

It was under "Personals," and it said: "Wanted—a friend interested in great religions lost in the Twentieth Century. Box 423, Tribune."

"So what?" I said. "Probably some nut."

He scratched a pimple, looking thoughtful. "Could lead to something interesting."

"You're damn well right it could, like getting murdered. Anyway I thought you were a Marxist these days. What happened to all your Dialectical Materialism?"

"No longer fashionable," he murmured, in the tone he used when he was teased about his mother being a lush. I suppose he had to have some defense, as I say he couldn't hurt a fly, but it always annoyed me when he was being elegant.

"Okay," I said, "go ahead and wear a white nightgown and sandals and eat nuts and raisins. Or maybe it's something like being saved with rattle snakes. I hear that's plenty fashionable in certain circles."

"Anyway," he said, shrugging as best he could while lying down, "I think I just might answer it."

And he did. At least he had the sense to give his return address as General Delivery at the Post Office so his new found soul-mate wouldn't come around to his house proclaiming The Word before he had been sized up. I wanted to read the letter Dan sent but he wouldn't let me, saying it would be an ethical violation. You never knew what was an ethical violation with him, because of his healthy eclecticism. Actually he was easiest to get along with when he hit on St. Thomas Aquinas and just sat around waiting for revelations.

The week after he mailed his letter he haunted the Post Office, waiting. Nothing happened. I was getting pretty eager to meet Box 423 myself, since, as I say, time hung heavy on our hands. I amused myself telling Dan I saw two small punctures at the base of his throat, and wasn't he feeling weak these days? Stuff like that. By the time another week had passed Dan was laughing too, and started busying himself with Kierkegaard.

Then something funny happened. We were sitting on the side porch as usual, and Dan was discussing his current favorite in the world of thought. Of course I wasn't listening too hard, but I remember that he was saying something about "—by virtue of the absurd." Then he stopped. After a minute or so of silence I looked up at him, expecting him to go on, and I could hardly believe my eyes. Oh, it was Dan sitting there, all right, in his old torn T-shirt and dirty jeans, but something had happened to him. I don't know exactly how to put it. It was like someone else was looking out of Dan's eyes. They were narrowed to slits behind his heavy horned rims, and his mouth was drawn up to one side in a sad smile. All at

once he brought his hand up with the index finger pointing to the sky and said, very softly, "But let us make a virtue of the absurd. There is no truth without paradox, and no virtue so absurd as faith." It was Dan's voice, too, but somehow sand-papered down and refined and most of all old, very old and wise. But the funniest part about it was that it spoke the truth. Just in the few words I was completely convinced, even though I wasn't sure of what. I just knew it was the truth.

As I watched open-mouthed Dan blinked a couple of times, then took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

"What did you say?" I asked him.

"About Kierkegaard? Oh, that he says you have faith by virtue of the absurd—"

"No, right after that. What was it?"

He shook his head.

"That's about as far as I've gotten." He heaved himself up off the glider. "I guess I'd better go home for a while. I don't feel so hot."

And with that he ambled down the walk toward his house.

He didn't come over the next day, nor the day after that. On the third day I began to be worried, and bored at being alone, so I walked over to Dan's. After looking through the quiet house I found him lying down up in his bedroom, not reading, just lying there. He looked at me listlessly and then turned his eyes away.

"What's the matter?" I asked, sitting down on the end of the bed.

"Nothing."

I hit his leg.

"Come on, boy, where have you been? Are you sick?"

He was quiet for a minute; he seemed to be thinking this over. Then he said, "I don't know. I don't know whether I'm sick or not."

"What the hell," I said, not knowing what else to say.

He sat up suddenly, putting his face near mine. His eyes were scarey-looking; he looked like a trapped, sick animal.

"Listen, I've got to talk to somebody. I think I'm going crazy. I'm bound to be. There's no other explanation for it." He was trembling.

"Take it easy," I said, moving back. "Tell me about it."

He jumped up off the bed and began rummaging around in some papers on his desk, mumbling to himself.

"Okay," he said, shoving a paper under my nose, "is this my handwriting or not?"

I looked, and it was. I told him so.

"Okay," he said again, running his hand through his hair. "Okay, it's my handwriting. But get this. *I didn't write it.*"

"Who did?" I said, sensibly enough.

"That's just it. I *must* have, but I don't remember doing it. I don't even understand it. Listen. 'The metaphysical explains itself in terms of its own metaphysics, never nominally.' And this: 'The

real cannot be apprehended linguistically, therefore does not exist empirically. The search is futile; we will abandon it." Dan looked up at me. "I understand that last, all right, but I don't think it's true. Why would I have written it?"

"In your sleep, maybe?" I suggested.

"Maybe. That's another thing, the weird dream I've been having, always the same thing. You ever dream that you're falling?" I nodded. "Well this is like that, only I hit. I hit the bottom and it's like dying, like I imagine dying would be. Everything doesn't turn black because everything is already black, and I feel this great—loss. A great sense of something lost is the only way I can explain it. And then nothing. When I wake up in the morning it's like swimming up out of a . . . a pit. Every morning it takes longer and longer." He shuddered.

"Look, Dan, you aren't going crazy. You're just having some bad dreams." I wasn't as sure as I sounded. "How long has this been going on?"

"About a week. Maybe longer, I can't remember." He got up off the bed and started walking around the room. "It's the writing that's bothering me. I couldn't have done it, but I did. Sleep-walking is a symptom of epilepsy; I might have that."

What was I to say? The poor guy was going out of his mind over the possibility he might *already* be out of his mind. Certainly his mother or father wouldn't be any help. One thing I knew for sure: he shouldn't be by himself as long as he was feeling like this.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," I said, making him sit down on the bed beside me. "I'll spend the night with you tonight and watch you. If you do anything crazy, then you can go see a doctor. Probably all you need is some vitamins or sleeping pills or something like that. But we'll make sure first. Okay?"

I thought he was going to cry for a minute, but he smiled at me instead.

"Would you? Would you do that?"

I knew my mother would put up a fight, because of Dan's mother and her drinking, but I thought I could talk her into it. She was always saying how sorry she felt for "that poor little boy."

"Sure. You wait right here and I'll be back with my stuff in fifteen minutes." I slapped his shoulder more heartily than I felt and left.

I got around my mother by promising I positively would not take a drink of anything. I don't know why she thought I'd drink any quicker at Dan's house than my own; Dad certainly kept the stuff on hand. Actually, just one look at Dan's mother when she tied one on (which was always) was enough to keep you on the wagon for life, though usually I never saw her. She kept pretty much to her room, and sometimes you could hear the sound of crying through her closed door.

That night Dan and I opened a can of chile con carne, made some

peanut butter sandwiches, warmed up a dish of macaroni and cheese that was in the refrigerator and washed it down with cokes. We felt pretty set up and I had never seen Dan so cheerful; he was almost elated. I figured it was his night so I consented to listen to some of his records (Scriabin, Chavez) and tried not to yawn. Then he got out his Baudelaire and started reading aloud to me from that—an enchanted evening. I was glad when he finally yawned and I said it was time to go to bed.

By the time we climbed into the twin beds his good mood had vanished and he lay on his back, not talking, staring at the ceiling. I tried to get him to talk but he wouldn't, he just shook his head, so I snapped off the light and settled down. I tried to stay awake until I could tell by his breathing that he was asleep but I guess I couldn't, because the next thing I remember was waking up, suddenly. Dan was asleep, all right; I tried to remember where I'd heard breathing that deep before, and then it came back to me. It was when my father, who is a doctor, had let me watch an appendectomy. They had given the patient sodium pentathol and about on the count of nine he had quit counting and started this deep breathing: way in, pause, way out. It kind of scared me, thinking about his dream of falling and death, so I leaned over to his bed and whispered, "Dan. Dan." I didn't want to wake him up all the way, just bring him out of that weird breathing.

It stopped. For what seemed like at least five minutes it didn't start again, at all, and I started to get really scared. The light from the streetlamp shone in dimly and he looked like a corpse. Just as I was about to switch on the light and call my Dad, he spoke.

"So someone came."

It was that voice again. The voice that was his and yet wasn't . . . the old, wise, tired voice. My heart ballooned up in my throat and I couldn't even yell. I couldn't do anything except stay there, staring at Dan's closed eyelids.

"This time I was so certain."

It was Dan talking, all right, or anyway the voice was coming out of him.

"You must understand, I didn't want to harm anyone. I've tried so many different places, and always there is someone who cares. This time I was sure, until you came . . ."

The complete truth of the voice overwhelmed me again, and for some crazy reason I wasn't scared any more. Don't ask me why; you would have to have heard that voice. So I said "Yes, I came. I care."

There was a pause, and then the voice said "Very well."

I never told him about it. I told him he had been okay during the night and to forget about it. He seemed his old self again, and we were very close during our last years in high school. He went east to college and I went to the state university but we wrote to each other often, keeping pretty well in touch. He was coming here to

spend the holidays with me last Christmas, but the car in which he was riding turned over and he was killed instantly, the only one in the car who was even hurt.

So now he'll never know. I don't let myself think too deeply about what happened that night, but every once in a while I remember that tired, sorrowful voice and wonder about it. One thing I know for sure: I'll never answer an ad under "Personals" in the newspaper.

The Song of Love

Keith Shields

HE SAT in the straight-back rocking chair in the front room of the old farmhouse. As he played the harmonica she had found for him in his attic trunk, their tiny baby held her eyes wide in quiet wonder at hearing the new sound.

Sheila held the infant close to her breast and the baby craned her back seeking the origin of the strange waugh-waugh sound. Her small mouth hung open and the clear saliva leaked onto Sheila's print house-dress. Sheila smiled at the baby and then looked at the man who played the harmonica.

And while the man across the room, her husband, blew the sad music floating into the warm air of the farmhouse, and while her baby, the small Teresa, cavorted and cooed at her breast, Sheila let the harmonica suck her in its undertow back through time.

Back through the recent anxious years when she had felt the springtime bloom of her body begin to droop and had married in desperation. Back and past the gay Christmas parties with the girls at the office and the days of clothes by de Marte and hair styles by Pinello. The music washed her ashore finally at her sixteenth summer, the one summer in her life that she had really been in love.

I was young, so young. And I wore my hair long, to my shoulders, 'cause he liked it that way. Blond, curly-headed Don. What a time we had at White Beach that summer, in the sun, always in the sun. He had a lovely body, and the sand stuck to the muscles of his arms where he had lain. Never could quit talking. All the time he talked and it was relaxing to hear him chat on and on about the waterskiers, or the blubbery old women in their half-ton bathing suits. Something was wrong with everyone. Everyone but me. He was wonderful. Oh, those beach parties! Look at me, look at me everybody! And sidling back and forth across the sand balanced tip-up fashion on his hands like an escaping crab. How he could make us laugh. He could make anyone laugh. Or cry. Like the time he played "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" on his harmonica with only the campfire to light and warm the party. The music was so sad and beautiful . . . Should've said, "Yes, Don." Should've said, "I will be your wife." Should've. Should've. While the firelight had not yet died and the moon was still up. "Yes, Don. Yes, Don."