

Chapter 26

A MIRROR SLIGHTLY WARPED

To: sleemans@pet.csis-scrs.gc.ca
From: david@ase.ca
Subject: Shen's people

Josh --

I've been taken to a farm.

Shen let me drive partway--south and west from Paxton--then slipped something in my coffee. I was out for eighteen hours. He knows about my working for Canadian Intelligence and killed my laptop's wireless. I'm connecting with the card you had me bring. There's a router somewhere on the premises.

His "people" call themselves The Caucus. From what little I've been told, it sounds as if they formed back in the sixties. The farm used to be a commune. With cabins and an added dorm, I'd say it once held twenty-five to thirty. Now it seems to be some sort of chapter house. No whiff of hippiedom remains.

Kirin's here--voluntarily, she says. She says her daughter's here as well, and Roy Calhoun, though I've seen neither of them yet.

I've encountered seven people total. Four arrived by king-cab yesterday, two with luggage. The truck's the only vehicle around here other than my car and Kirin's.

Shen has gone away, but I'm told he'll be returning. He's not the leader of this "Caucus". I'm to meet the man who is today.

Kirin has admitted that her disappearance was contrived. The object was to get me back to the retreat so Shen could reel me in. I've no idea why. And now I'm here, apparently I'm free to leave. No sooner did I wake from being drugged than my car keys were returned.

It's early morning now. Still dark. I'm sending this before the house is up lest someone check the LAN and notice there's an extra node.

What now?

--

DA

I logged off ase.ca and powered down the laptop. Even early in the morning, piggybacking on the farmhouse LAN was risky. Routers can be set to maintain logs. I had a small utility called wif-sniffer that took care of sussing out a router's key but not of cracking the administrative password.

A solitary bird was peeping, harbingering dawn. I went over to the window and looked out.

What's to stop me from disclosing the location when I leave?
I'd asked Mr. Shen.

You won't.

Won't say where I was? Or won't be leaving?

Certainly the first. Quite possibly the second.

Riddles wrapped in mysteries inside enigmas. What had Mr. Shen been trying to tell me? Was the second of his statements meant to be a warning? Or was it, like the first, prolepsis to be borne out by my actions? Because I hadn't told Josh Byron where I was. I hadn't given names. In fact, I'd told him nothing. All I'd done was keep a channel of communication open. Did that mean I'd end up staying here as well? I observed I wasn't going anywhere. There seemed to be no *where* to go.

There seemed to be no *here* here, either. A glass wall had

sprung up between the world and my senses. I saw and heard all right, but in a daze. What would Ferko have say about it? I'd have given anything to hear his voice just then.

Yesterday, while I was still with Kirin, Cook had rung the bell to signal lunch. We'd walked over to the kitchen, joining Marion plus two men and two women who'd arrived by king-cab. I got introduced—re-introduced—to one, and was presented to the others.

I shook hands, accepted hugs and ate Cook's lunch aware all eyes were on me like lion in the zoo at feeding time. Conversation of no import swirled around the table. I wanted to ask questions, but froze before I could. I wasn't sure which would be worse: spotting lies that said this was a monstrous set-up, or sensing truths that meant my lunch companions held the answer to my missing years.

Over coffee Marion held out an olive branch by offering to show me round the house. We started at the back—the long addition—which held sleeping quarters and two "quiet rooms". Marion repeated that they'd once been used for therapeutic counselling.

In the cellar of the house itself, shelving crammed with banker's boxes lined the walls.

"The Caucus archives," Marion informed me. "We call it Chancery. And if that's not bad enough," she waved her hand toward a tall white metal cupboard with red crosses on the doors, "that there's the Apothecary. Chancery, Apothecary—sounds like the chorus of a patter song."

On the second floor, she pointed out the bathroom and a closed door near the formal staircase.

"Dr. Colton's study. These days he doesn't like to be disturbed. He knows you're here, of course. He'll be seeing you tomorrow. If you haven't flown the coop, that is."

A flick of eyes, both query and admonishment.

The library took up the ground floor's southern half, its collection an expanded version of Cassandra Island's. At a guess, with floor-to-ceiling shelves, five thousand books in all. On a bottom shelf, bracketed by volumes on psychology, philosophy, arcana and the vatic arts, were paperbacks by Heinlein, Bradbury, Zelazny,

Asimov and Zenna Henderson.

“This used to be your home inside a home,” Marion informed me in the voice reserved for libraries and churches.

So what? She knew I liked to read. But the way she said now it held a trace of expectation. *Not in the hope of epiphanic recollections* . . . Yet there she was, anticipating one.

I made a show of reading spines then tugged a brick by H. Blavatsky from the shelves. Co-founder of theosophy, Blavatsky wrote in prose that brought enlightenment through narcolepsy.

“I’m tired, Marion,” I said abruptly. “I’m going back upstairs.”

I’d slept the afternoon away, woken by a knock at six. The doorframe cracked like gunshot when I yanked it open. Cook was in the hallway with a steaming supper tray.

“I saw your face at lunch,” she said. “Poor dear. I’m guessing that you’d rather dine alone.”

She set the tray down on the dresser, gave my arm a squeeze and left without another word. Country ham steaks, mashed potatoes, peas and carrots, rhubarb pie . . .

Afterwards I’d started in on *Isis Unveiled*. Predictably, Blavatsky’s prose weighed heavy on my eyes. I’d slipped between the sheets and dozed off once again.

The lonely pre-dawn cheep outside was swelling to a chirping, cawing ruckus. Rags of mist across the road were changing into cloth-of-gold as, in the east behind the house, the sun began to rise.

Could this really have been home?

I donned a clean white T-shirt, scrubbed my scalp until it tingled, pulled the door I’d left unsnugged and went down to the kitchen.

The smell of bacon greeted me. Cook was at her Garland wielding tongs like a conductor.

“David! I was sure you’d be up early. How are you feeling? Did you get a good night’s sleep?”

“If length’s the measure of how good it was, then yes.”

“I’m so glad. This must all be overwhelming. Sit, sit. Do you still like porridge in the morning?”

"I do, but most days I'm too lazy to make anything but toast."

She *tsk*-ed.

"Breakfast is still the most important meal of the day. Though I have to say you don't look underfed." She spooned a gob of oatmeal into a cereal bowl. "Not a bit. You've filled out very nicely. And haven't grown a paunch. I'm surprised, given how you used to eat."

She put the bowl in front of me and fetched a creamer.

"When's breakfast normally?" I asked.

"Half an hour from now. Luke's usually the first to straggle in."

"Luke?"

Neither of the men I'd met were Lukes.

Cook scurried to the stove. "You'll be meeting him," she said, her back to me. "He's our farmhand now."

Now? "What was he before?"

She started flipping bacon like her life depended on it.

"I sense you weren't supposed to mention him," I said.

The porridge pot received a mighty stir. Something in the oven needed tending. The bacon got more twiddling.

"We have a rule, David. You're not supposed to use your gift without permission."

"I know. Marion told me. I'm not reading you." At least, I didn't think I was. "Can I ask you something? Are you psychic, like the others?"

"No. Neither is Marion. We're the only ones who aren't."

"So I could read you if I wanted to? You wouldn't know?"

"You could try but it won't work. You used to, you know, all the time, but you never did discover where I hid the brownies. It feels odd, me being the one to tell you this, but non-psychics can be taught to hide specific things from empaths. I'm getting old but I haven't lost the skill. My mouth is what betrays me now. I'm such a chatterer these days."

Getting old? She looked like eighty was a distant memory.

She turned from the stove. "You won't tell Dr. Colton, will you?"

"That you mentioned someone I don't know called Luke? I can

manage that. If you promise to bake brownies for me sometime.”

Her face melted.

“Thank you, David. There’s so much you have to know, but Dr. C insists you have to get it slowly. Speaking of whom, he wants to see you after breakfast. His, that is, not yours. He takes it in his study. Will you be going back upstairs after you’re done here? I can call you when I get his tray.”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do. Most likely take a walk. How’s about you tell your Dr. C that I’ll be free at ten?”

She gave me a funny look.

“You really have grown up. It’s going to take some getting used to. Now—more oatmeal? Or would you like an egg?”



I raised my hand.

It’s just a door.

It’s just a room.

It’s probably all bullshit.

I knocked.

“Come in.”

Muted by the door, the voice was whispery like fall leaves stirring in a breeze. I turned the knob and entered.

The room was long and dim. Velvet swags freed from their tiebacks pooled on the floor behind an L-shaped desk. A banker’s lamp shed quiet incandescence on a blue expanse of blotter. A monitor and keyboard occupied the short leg of the L. Phosphor from the angled screen reflected off the high back of a studded oxblood chair, which had been turned to face the curtains. The seat on this side of the desk looked puny by comparison.

Where was Dr. Colton?

I shut the door and looked around. An entertainment centre filled the far end of the room. Two chintz armchairs faced a big TV—an older model with a massive CRT. The green shade of the banker’s lamp glowed distant in the curving glass. Wooden filing

cabinets lined the other walls. Hardback volumes sat on top, held in place by bookends. An heirloom clock stood sentry in one corner resonantly marking time. The air was rich with lemon oil and beeswax.

“David. Have a seat.”

The same dry voice, emanating from the high-backed chair. I went over to the desk and took a seat.

A minute passed ticked off in weighty seconds. The studded oxblood quivered. I heard a sound that might have been a sigh.

“When you were seventeen, you woke up in an alley unable to remember how you got there. It was early June—the third, to be precise. It had rained the night before. You were in a doorway, sheltered from the elements.

“Dressed as you are now you found your wallet in your jeans. It was filled with hundred dollar bills but no ID. You knew your name, though, and your age. Most likely, to this day, you’re unaware it was your birthday.

“It can’t have taken long to figure out what city you were in. But while you knew the streets and landmarks, nothing felt familiar. You had no recollection of a life lived there, just an inner map to help you find your way.

“I won’t conjecture how you spent that day. All I can be certain of is that you realized at some point your amnesia wasn’t total. Images from childhood surfaced, likely within hours, and you pieced together that your memory gap spanned nearly six years total.

“You spent the days and weeks that followed roaming round Toronto, hoping to encounter something—anything—to tie you to the city. You found nothing. It occurred to you that agencies existed that might help, yet you shied away from them. Your memories of childhood continued to return, but only to a certain point. Debilitating pain set in whenever you went past it. Images of fire figured at such times.

“An element of what you could recall was an imaginary friend who led your games and was your partner in delinquency. You wondered if your ‘friend’ was the result of guilt displacement and

contemplated trauma as the cause of your amnesia.

“Over time you realized you had a gift. You could see into the minds of others. Sense their wholeness, so to speak—who they were, what they were, how they saw themselves. You could even make predictions, though that skill was fleeting and erratic. Against all logic you denied your gift, maintaining it came from careful observation and a flair for putting two and two together. Even now you hold to that position.

“Miss Harper tells me you’re protective of your past. You never talk about the years before you won your jackpot. We knew of that, of course; it was in the news. Your name came as a shock, but not the fact of winning. Most of us are lucky around money, though seldom so dramatically.

“I have no way of knowing how you used your gift at first. I hope some day you’ll tell me. Know, though, that your current title, ‘counsellor’, is common among people with your talent. The Caucus coalesced around a nucleus of therapists.

“Your moving in beside Miss Harper took us by surprise—proof of the old saw about the best-laid plans. Since your first day in Toronto, stringent measures had been taken *not* to know your whereabouts or doings, to forestall all contact between you and Caucus members.”

The disembodied speech came to a caesura. The interval was preparation, not a pause requiring confirmation or acknowledgment.

“There is no easy way to say this,” it went on. “You killed a man. This farm was once your home. We brought you here, provided schooling, helped you with your gift. Then at age sixteen you wantonly misused that gift, resulting in a member’s death.

“You didn’t mean to kill him but events before his death as we uncovered them revealed you had abilities we didn’t know about, ones you’d hidden from us and that posed a threat as long as you stayed here.”

A slow intake of breath—patient, almost fatalistic.

“The overriding mandate of the Caucus is protection, protection

bought with secrecy. You knew that once. You understood. As you will again. My aim is not to keep things from you.

“You can’t, however, learn too much too fast. For now what I can tell you—the ending of one story and the prologue to another—is that your memory loss was self-inflicted. You gave yourself amnesia. No trauma was involved. You voluntarily walled off six years, and, with our help, ensured that what you’d done could never be repeated.”

The polish-scented air was growing stifling. The heirloom clock ticked louder than before. The oxblood chair rocked slightly spilling glitter from the studs upon the desk.

“Your memories can be recovered—reassembled—but the process will take time. The conflict between what you can’t recall and the Self you’ve built up in its absence could result in catastrophic ego fragmentation.

“Meanwhile, you can *hear* about your missing years, which may distress you but will not provoke the pain you fear. That response is triggered by your memories as memories. Once you know the story and your psyche is prepared, you’ll be ready to reintegrate them as experienced reality.

“For that to happen, though, our major obstacle is trust. What can you believe? There’s a folder on my desk beneath the blotter. Please have a look.”

Age had darkened the manila. The spine was pleated; it had once held far more documents. On top, a birth certificate: *St. Joseph’s ... Hamilton... Ase, David...3rd of June...* Underneath on ruled paper, writing that resembled mine but far too neat, the schoolroom not yet whittled off the conscientious strokes.

PSYCHISM:

Components, Features, and Restrictions

1. What constitutes a psychic...

“You’re looking at a project written for Miss Harper. It’s a detailed summary of psychism’s chief attributes. Impressive for a boy of sixteen years. You had more gifts than empathy.”

I couldn't take my eyes off the familiar handwriting.

2. *Limitations on psychism*

3. *Demographics*

4. *How psychism works...*

Dr. Colton rose.

"It's my habit to go walking at this time of day. For my health. I'd like you to come with me. If you would, please wait downstairs. I'll join you shortly."



I needed air. I needed light. I needed ground beneath my feet.

Dr. Colton found me in the lane behind the house, scuffing up the hardpack with my toe.

"I go this way," he said, pointing with a cane toward the north end of the barn.

He wore an old man's business suit, somewhere between brown and grey, the jacket open with no tie. As with Mr. Shen I couldn't fix his age. He still had all his hair, silver white and very fine, the scalp beneath it pink with sun. The years had etched a roadmap on his face although the flesh was taut, like lizard skin. His light brown eyes were ringed with blueish-grey, but bright. A good ten centimetres under my one-eighty, he stooped but walked as if his cane were more for show than use.

The barn's wide doors were open. I heard the clink of tools inside and caught a flash of movement.

Tractor ruts cut round the field behind. Dr. Colton picked his way toward the fence that marked the southern boundary. He swept his cane from right to left, encompassing the field and a woodlot at the back.

"We'll go all around," he said. "That should give us time."

"For what?"

"To begin recounting," he said, glancing at the barn. "To recount beginnings."

We set off slowly, sticking to the ruts between the cornfield and the post-and-wire fence.

“Almost everything I tell you,” he began, “you already know. It’s buried with your memories. Everything you learned about us here, everything pertaining to the facts about your gift, is still inside you.”

A breeze blew up, fluttering the waxy leaves of corn. They rustled dryly, like the sound of Dr. Colton’s voice with no inflection.

“In nineteen thirty-nine when war broke out, I was in my second year pre-med at Queen’s. My intention was to go into psychiatry. I dropped my studies, joined the air force, learned radar mechanics, and went overseas in nineteen forty, stationed at Bagin-ton near the cathedral town of Coventry.

“In the fall of that same year, Hitler ordered the attack on Coventry that brought the verb, to coventrate, into the English language. It means ‘to devastate by aerial bombing’.

“The blitz came on the fourteenth of November. It’s widely held that Churchill knew about it in advance, but sacrificed the city to safeguard the secret that the British had already cracked the German military code—the Enigma ciphers. That belief is wrong. Churchill knew of an attack, but not the time or place. Others did, however. They knew because I told them.

“The previous September, recovering from leave—in other words, on my knees glued to the john—I had a premonition of the bombing, a vision so detailed I reported it. Our wing’s group captain listened with a partial ear—I’d been barred from poker after cleaning out the whole wing three nights running—filed a report, and made a mess hall story of the corporal whose vomit told the future.

“The story didn’t seem so funny after the attack. I was relieved of duties and subjected to interrogation at the hands of MI5. Their methods were... aggressive. Pain, like illness, is a trigger for long-range prevoyance, and I had a second premonition of *another* raid on Coventry. In my vision it was early spring; the leaves were only just beginning on the trees. I relayed the details to my questioners, even though I might be tried and shot if what I said came true.”

The deep-throated chugging of a tractor started in the barn, followed by protesting gears and noisy clattering. Dr. Colton cocked an ear and waited for the sounds to coalesce and fade.

“That raid took place on April eighth, nineteen forty-one. By then, MI5 was satisfied I was no spy, so instead of being executed, I was squired down to Cambridge and ‘lent’ to SIS—MI6 as it had been renamed, Britain’s Secret Service. My branch’s mandate, in conjunction with the Society for Psychical Research—their archives were conveniently nearby—was to turn the Nazis’ trust in things occult to Britain’s favour and to gather what intelligence we could by psychic means.

“Nothing much came out of that initiative but rumours that still circulate today. Mostly all we did was sit around and wait for psychic flashes, or study the ephemeris for what the Third Reich’s augurers were likely telling Hitler. I held long conversations with our SPR associates and whiled away the hours in their archives.”

The whine of a cicada rose up from the trees ahead. The woodlot was in shadow, backlit by a sun that seemed to sink as we approached.

“In nineteen forty-three a soldier from Wisconsin was assigned to work with us. We were told he could read minds and had had flashes of foreknowledge. What about, we weren’t allowed to ask. As so often with Americans, the pooling of intelligence went one direction only. The soldier’s name was Private Finnestad.

“We gravitated to each others’ company, two hard-R’d North Americans awash in public school accents. He was a farmboy: twenty-two, introspective—shy, almost—rarely speaking unless spoken to. Still, he was the one who broached the subject of our talents first.

“We shared a common gift, one experienced more often in our knowledge about people than in glimpses of the future. Neither of us understood. We knew no others like us. The SPR was focused on the supernatural. What went on inside our heads bore no relation to their poltergeists and ectoplasm. Their archives didn’t help much, either.

“Garrett’s parents were religionists. Speaking of his gift was never easy. He’d been beaten for it as a child. I admired his courage every time he opened up.”

The air grew cooler as we neared the woodlot. The fence came to an end outside the trees. Dr. Colton stopped beside the final post—recently replaced, its yellow wood still oozing sap—and gestured with his cane.

“You used to play in here. Any time we couldn’t find you, this is where you’d be.”

“Did that happen often?”

“Nearly every day.”

The sun no longer in my eyes, I could make out maples, alders, oaks and ash. A clump of willows formed a silver island in the mass of darker greens. Dr. Colton bent a little to relieve his back, then straightened up and carried on. The forest, to our right, exhaled the smell of raspberries and underbrush.

“After the war, I finished my degree at Queens, enrolled in medicine at U of T, did a psychiatric residency, and headed for New York to study at the newly-founded Institute for Gestalt Therapy under Fritz and Laura Perls.

“Gestalt was radical in its time. It claimed a patient’s real experience—his or her perceptions in the here and now—was vastly more important than a therapist’s analysis. It borrowed from Gestalt psychology, which looks at how we organize perception. Both psychology and therapy break with convention. They emphasize totalities rather than component parts—what’s called a ‘field approach’.

“Normal scientific method speculates, observes and classifies. It breaks things down in order to make sense of them. A field approach is just the opposite. It considers things in their entirety. It doesn’t try to understand a puzzle from its pieces. It seeks to understand the pieces from the puzzle. It is less concerned with constituting parts than how they interact. Its main thrust is discovery—description, not analysis; revelation, not hypothesis.”

The flow of words fell off. Insect humming filled my ears. Dr.

Colton's story felt too ordered for an old-man's reminiscence; he was lost in something else. I tried to see it in my head but nothing came. Just grey, undifferentiated calm—like Roy, like Mr. Shen, like Kirin.

After fifty or so metres he resumed.

“In nineteen fifty-three I communicated with the SPR for help in setting up a chapter here in Canada. I wanted to research the gift that Garrett and I shared. Affiliation with them seemed a good idea. I hoped their contacts might direct me toward others who were like us.

“In that regard, it was the counselling community that proved most useful. When the SPR officially acknowledged us in fifty-four, our group consisted of myself, three other therapists—all empaths as we later came to understand—and two noteworthy clients. One was like the rest of us, though deeply anxious, much like Kirin Neemes. The other was convinced her states of mind were being broadcast so that people did her will against their own, crippling her with guilt and damning her to isolation. Both had had significant prevoyant episodes.

“The approach of our Canadian Chapter, influenced by Gestalt, differed from the SPR's. Instead of seeking proof of our experience—to us it was a given—we concentrated on describing it, phenomenologically, without recourse to analysis. In a sense we were returning to a scientific method pioneered by Goethe, one that emphasized an intimate, first-hand encounter between object and observer in an effort to discern how what was being studied would describe itself had it the power to speak.

“That intimate approach to research led us to uncover what we termed primary psychism: empathy and imprinting. It allowed us to explore them thoroughly, both inwardly, alone, and in contact with each other. Our delicate empiricism, to use a phrase of Goethe's, also helped us see the link between primary psychism and prevoyance. Furthermore, it indicated that telepathy—a subject much investigated by the SPR—was not the same as psychism, but rather, a phenomenon apart. Psychics, as we came to use the term, were

never telepathic.”

A crow cawed overhead. Swallows burst up from the middle of the field, peppering the sky with tiny arrowheads. Dr. Colton watched them wheel and fly off.

“I lost touch with Garrett after forty-five. He left the army and went back to work the family farm. His involvement with the psychic branch of SIS was still on record, though, and in fifty-three, the CIA, newly risen from the ashes of the wartime Office of Strategic Services, requested his participation in their MKULTRA project.

“MKULTRA’s shameful purpose, as I’m sure you know, was to research mind control through experiments involving radiation, paralytics, psychotropics, induced comas, electroshock and sensory deprivation. The majority of subjects were unwilling, culled from mental institutions, penitentiaries and people living on the street. There were, however, volunteers. Perversely, they got singled out for even more extreme experiments.

“MKULTRA’s mandate didn’t stop at brainwashing and high-tech torture. A sub-project, designated F-RK, sought ways of using psychics for intelligence and covert operations. In the era of the Red Scare, nothing was considered too farfetched.

“For three years Garrett patriotically took part in scientific horrors aimed at finding and enhancing psychic skill. Driven to a breakdown by prolonged amphetamine-barbiturate rotation, he ran off in fifty-six with a suitcase full of purloined documents and film. Cadging rides through Minnesota into Canada, he ended up in Winnipeg and spent the next year homeless in a haze of booze and goofballs.

“He tracked me down in fifty-seven, calling from a pay phone—drunk, alone and scared. I took the train to Winnipeg, dried him out and brought him here. Part for therapy and partly since the property was idle—I’m a doctor, not a homesteader—I gave him sanctuary managing the farm.”

The woodlot ended at the fence that ran between the corn and soya fields. The soya field was narrower but twice as long. The tractor we’d heard earlier sat quiet in the farthest corner, crimson on the

mat of dark green crops.

Dr. Colton rested on his cane.

“At first I credited his stories about torture tests performed on psychics to amphetamine psychosis. But in his suitcase, when he trusted me enough to open it, were very real documents and footage. Any madness that there was was in the horrors that they chronicled.”

With more stiffness than before, he started on the last leg of our circuit.

“It was evident that F-RK was shooting in the dark: telekinesis, astral projection, remote sensing, map dowsing. The project hoped to augment psychic skills—difficult to do since the skills it sought were lifted from the pages of *Amazing Stories*. However, subject Finnestad and at least two others displayed abilities susceptible to spiking in the course of certain trials. Rather than researching those abilities—trying to grasp their essence—F-RK went for results, intensifying trial conditions, hoping to prolong or boost the spike.

“Speaking for our chapter, I wrote the SPR warning them that psychics—whether genuine or not—were at risk from Cold War agencies. I urged them to take measures. Their response, British to the core, evinced distaste for what they styled political engagement. ‘In times of war we do our duty. In times of peace we are but humble scientists.’

“Psychic testing on the scale implied by F-RK was something new. How long till they lost their taste for science fiction and began exploring real human attributes—our capacity to empathize, our ability to influence, our power to anticipate? Psychism is a transmutation, not a faculty apart. We saw in it the seeds of practical compassion. Would they see weaponry instead? To what lengths would they go to hunt down and deploy it? We already had an inkling.”

The tractor in the neighbouring field coughed into life. I looked around. A cloud of dust was heading down the fence.

“I flew to London several times, hoping to persuade the SPR to change its stance. They wanted to hear nothing of the CIA or MKULTRA F-RK. Our chapter’s paranoid agenda, they informed

me, was disruptive. I persisted, earning us the soubriquet, the Canuck Caucus. I wondered then and cannot help but wonder now: What prompted their hands-off response? Canuck is not a British word. It's favoured by Americans.

"In sixty-two, we came to a decision and advised the SPR our chapter was dissolving, citing rifts within the group itself. We wanted them, or anyone who asked, to think we had disbanded. For added measure, members changed their names—myself included; I was born Sebastian Carver. In short, we chose to make ourselves invisible, believing secrecy to be our best defence against the CIA or any other agency involved in clandestine research.

"The SPR knew nothing of this farm. All our correspondence had been through a numbered box. We felt safe continuing to use it. And on account of its location—plus, I confess, to thumb our noses at the SPR—we re-baptized ourselves the Binbrook Caucus."

He measured out the sentence like an actor finishing a scene. His timing was impeccable. The tractor would have drowned him out. I felt it getting closer like a pressure on my back.

"Here endeth the lesson for today?" I said.

He gave a little smile. "You don't go to church."

"I know the phrase from movies."

And from books. And from TV shows, like Chris Carter's moody exploration of late-nineties' zeitgeist in the *X-Files* and *Millennium*, where shadowy cabals, MKULTRA and the CIA were tropes for angst and paranoia—dreamscape bogey-men, not flesh-and-blood reality.

We reached a stretch of scrubby grass that formed a lawn of sorts around the cabin with the porch. A barbeque of blackened bricks, a milkcrate-plywood workbench and a covered cord of firewood gave the place a lived-in look the others didn't have. Dr. Colton climbed the steps and sat down in a bucket seat—one of two, a refuse pail between them—and beckoned me to do the same.

The sun had reached full noon. Beyond the porch, everything looked faded. Whatever breeze there'd been had died. The only sound came from the tractor.

Down at Nebo Road, the king-cab truck turned in the lane. Dr. Colton took a handkerchief and touched it to his forehead.

“That’ll be John,” he said, more to himself than me.

The truck backed up and parked beside the Jag. Mr. Shen, the driver and another passenger emerged.

“Am I allowed to speak?” I asked.

He made an upward, open-handed gesture.

“Did you ever think of being a writer?”

“You believe it’s fiction,” he said, unperturbed.

“There are similarities to books I’ve read.”

He seemed amused. “You’re being very careful with your words.”

“I don’t know whom I might be pissing off,” I said, “nor the repercussions.”

He pursed his lips. “Wise, under the circumstances.”

The tractor’s chugging dwindled as it passed behind the cabin, then returned as it came into view and headed for the barn. Dr. Colton waited till it disappeared inside.

“You’re having trouble accepting all this,” he said. “I understand.”

“No, Dr. Colton, I don’t think so. As far as I can tell, you’ve contrived to make it difficult. I don’t think you understand one bit.”

“Fair enough. Birth certificates and handwriting can be forged. History can be invented. A man who doesn’t know who he is can easily be fooled.”

A figure strolled around the barn. Dr. Colton used his cane to push up from the bucket seat.

“Stay here a minute would you, David? I want to introduce you.”

He met the farmhand halfway down the track between the cabin and the barn. I couldn’t make him out—just a billed cap, work shirt, jeans and Kodiaks. The way he walked was disconcertingly familiar. For a second, impossibly, I thought of Cowboy.

As they got closer, snippets of their conversation reached me.

“...run-off. The ground’s too soft. We can’t just brace again.

The end posts have to go in concrete.”

“Poured?”

“Won’t take that much.”

I stood as they came up the steps. The farmhand wore his shirt tucked in, the sleeves rolled to his biceps. His arms were tanned and covered with a coppery-gold down. He smelled of work—perspiration, grass, raw wood. His head was lowered so I couldn’t see his face, but he had my height, my weight and almost certainly my age.

He pulled his cap off by the bill. The hair beneath was blond and damp. He swiped his forehead on a section of rolled sleeve and raised his head.

I was staring in a mirror slightly warped. He had my forehead, only higher. His cheeks were mine, but fuller. His nose tipped up a little; otherwise, it was the same. Our mouths were shaped identically though his was more compact.

But his eyes, no difference there: a clear, chrome green as startling as teardrops from an emerald. Sidelit by the noon-bright sun, the pupils drank the colour in and vanished.

“David,” I heard Dr. Colton raspy murmur, “say hello to Luke—your imaginary friend.”