

**CHASING
THE
BOOGYMAN**

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CHIZMAR


HODDER

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For Kara.

Again.

a note to readers

*C*hasing the Boogeyman is a work of fiction, an homage to my hometown and my passion for true crime. There are slices of life depicted throughout that are very much inspired by my personal history, but other events and real people and places and publications are used fictitiously, and to provide verisimilitude to this crime story. Other names, characters, settings, publications, and events come directly from my imagination, admittedly at times not a very nice place to inhabit.

one

The Town

“It was during those long, slow, breathless walks up that gravel driveway that I first began telling scary stories to my friends . . .”

1

Before I get to the Boogeyman and his reign of terror during the summer and fall of 1988, I want to tell you about the town where I grew up. It’s important that you carry with you a clear picture of the place—and the people who live there—as you read the story that follows, so you can understand exactly what it is we all lost. There is a John Milton quote that I think of often while driving the streets of my hometown: *“Innocence, once lost, can never be regained. Darkness, once gazed upon, can never be lost.”*

For the citizens of Edgewood, this was our time of darkness.

2

I believe that most small towns wear two faces: a public one comprised of verifiable facts involving historical timelines, demographics, matters of economy and geography; and a hidden, considerably more private face formed by a fragile spiderweb of stories, memories, rumors, and

secrets passed down from generation to generation, whispered by those who know the town best.

Edgewood, Maryland, located twenty-five miles northeast of Baltimore in southern Harford County, was no exception. Situated in the top center of an inverted triangular peninsula created by the Chesapeake Bay to the south, the Gunpowder River to the west, and the Bush River to the east, Edgewood was originally home to a number of Native Americans, most notably the Powhatan and Susquehannock tribes. Captain John Smith was among the first to navigate the Bush River, naming it “Willowbyes Flu” after his beloved hometown in England. In 1732, the Presbury Meetinghouse was established on the river’s shoreline as one of the first Methodist churches in America.

A railroad system constructed through the area in 1835 provided distribution for local agricultural markets, and the railroad’s extension in the mid-1850s provided a foundation for the town of Edgewood’s development. The wooden railroad bridge crossing the nearby Gunpowder River was burned in April 1861 during the Baltimore riots, and Confederate soldiers burned it a second time in July 1864.

Although the population of Edgewood was a mere three-dozen full-time residents in 1878, the railroad and neighboring countryside’s lush farmland contributed to eventual growth. Before long, there was an abundance of new homes in the area, including a number of extravagant residences, many erected by businessmen commuting daily to Baltimore via train. A schoolhouse, post office, hotel, general store, and blacksmith were soon established within the town’s borders.

The Edgewood train station also experienced increased popularity because of its proximity to valuable hunting grounds for numerous species of waterfowl. Soon, gentlemen sportsmen from northeastern cities as far-ranging as New York and Boston traveled to Edgewood to take part in the hunt. General George Cadwalader, a colorful war hero and respected Philadelphia lawyer, gradually acquired large plots of property in the area, consisting of almost eight thousand acres, and invited afflu-

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ent and influential friends to visit. He leased waterfront land to various hunting clubs and established more than a dozen farms on the property. Hardworking tenant farmers paid Cadwalader a healthy percentage of their seasonal crops.

Another prominent figure in Edgewood's early days was Herman W. "Boss" Hanson. A prosperous gentleman farmer and longtime member of the Maryland House of Delegates, Hanson was also a shrewd businessman. Tomatoes were his company's most profitable crop and at one point, he operated four canneries in the area and purchased all the other local farmers' tomatoes to fill orders. The canned fruit was marketed under the Queen Brand and sold all over the country, eventually even shipping overseas.

The only real drama in the town's history up until that point arrived in the summer of 1903, when a group of armed outlaws attempted to rob a payroll train docked at the Edgewood Station. A fierce gunfight erupted with the local constable and his men, resulting in the death of two lawmen, a civilian employee of the payroll company, and all six of the outlaws. A local newspaper reporter counted over two hundred and fifty bullet holes in the station's walls. Fortunately, such violence was rare in the still-rural town.

A short distance down the tracks was the Magnolia Station, named for the lovely magnolia trees that flourished there. Across from the station was Magnolia Meadows, a popular resort for picnics, outdoor events, and excursion parties from Baltimore. A spacious pavilion centered in the grove was used for dances and weddings, and by the early 1900s, Magnolia boasted a post office, church, schoolhouse, canning house, general store, shoe shop, and barbershop.

The pastoral life of those living in and around Edgewood changed dramatically in October 1917, when the U.S. government took possession of all the land south of the railroad tracks to create Edgewood Arsenal military complex. Thousands of people flocked to the area to construct a number of facilities designed to handle the various aspects

of chemical weaponry. The government built massive plants to produce such toxic chemicals as mustard gas, chlorine, chloropicrin, and phosgene. They even produced gas masks for horses, donkeys, and dogs. Peak employment during July 1918 totaled 8,342 civilians and 7,175 military personnel.

While wealthy residents such as General Cadwalader were reimbursed for their lost property, local tenant farmers and sharecroppers received no such payments. A number of Black farmers relocated to establish a small community of modest homes in the Magnolia area known as Dembytown. A general store, a two-room schoolhouse, and a ramshackle jazz club called the Black Hole were erected in a trio of narrow clapboard buildings along the northeastern border of Dembytown. The club burned down in 1920 under suspicious circumstances.

The burgeoning military presence soon transformed Edgewood. Schools, housing, and a multitude of businesses spread across the area. World War II brought yet another wave of military personnel and civilians to town. A modernized train station was hurriedly built to handle the great influx of people. Additional civilian barracks and off-post housing units were constructed in numerous Edgewood locations, including a twenty-six-acre development named Cedar Drive. The overflow of new residents, coupled with the completion of Route 40, a four-lane highway cutting through Edgewood, spurred further economic development. Edgewood Meadows, a sprawling community of single-family homes, was established in the early 1950s. Old Edgewood Road and Hanson Road bisected the sprawling development, and both roadways were soon dotted with commercial establishments. Farther south on Hanson Road, a sprawling community of affordable town houses, the Courts of Harford Square, was constructed, replacing over a hundred acres of fertile farmland. Sitting upon a grassy hill overlooking the new development stood the original "Hanson House" built by Thomas Hanson in the early 1800s. The grand Victorian home fea-

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tured fifty-one windows and seven gables, and was the first house in Edgewood to enjoy indoor plumbing. In 1963, the Edgewood Public Library opened on Hanson Road across from the bustling Acme supermarket. Later that same year, the Edgewood exit on Interstate 95 opened, spawning even greater numbers of residential neighborhoods. To support the influx of young students in the area, three spacious schools—a high school, middle school, and elementary school—were built on 102 acres along Willoughby Beach Road.

But with every boom there comes the inevitable bust—and in the years following the United States military’s involvement in Vietnam, a number of weapons testing programs at Edgewood Arsenal were either downsized or canceled altogether. Troops and civilian personnel were transferred to other bases along the East Coast and, soon after, numerous remote sections of the Arsenal took on the appearance of a ghost town. For several years, there were well-publicized rumors that the U.S. government planned to open a paratrooper school in the abandoned areas, but those plans never materialized.

By the late 1980s, the unincorporated community of Edgewood covered almost seventeen square miles. Population hovered at nearly 18,000 people—68% White, 27% African American, and 3.5% Hispanic. The median household income was a slightly below national average, \$40,500. The average household was 2.81 occupants, and the average family size was 3.21.

This was the public face of Edgewood, Maryland.

3

This is the Edgewood I know and love:

I grew up in a modest two-story house with green shutters and a sloping driveway at the corner of Hanson and Tupelo Roads. That

house and the sidewalks, streets, and yards that surrounded it were my entire world from the time I was five years old until I left for college at the age of seventeen. My parents still live there today.

I was the youngest of five children—following in the footsteps of three sisters (Rita, Mary, and Nancy) and the eldest of the bunch, my brother (John)—by a margin of nearly eight years. In other words, I was probably a mistake. I've never actually asked my parents if that was the case, but I've heard it enough times from my siblings to mostly believe it to be true. Regardless, it never really mattered.

My father (retired U.S. Air Force, a quiet, hardworking man of decency and integrity) and my mother (a diminutive-in-stature caregiver of the first order, and still very much the Ecuadorian beauty my father married) treated their children with equal measures of love and understanding and patience. Well, almost. I must admit that as the youngest—and some say the cutest—not to mention the last of the Chizmar clan to live under their roof, I very well may be my parents' favorite.

But I digress.

The white-painted front door and large bay window of our house peered out upon Hanson Road, one of the busiest-traveled roadways in all of Edgewood. The speed limit sign posted directly across the street read 25 mph, but few drivers obeyed that particular law. The right side of our house bordered Tupelo Road, a much quieter, tree-lined avenue that stretched all the way from Tupelo Court across the street to Presbury United Methodist Church on Edgewood Road.

A small, enclosed breezeway connected our dining room to a single-car garage. The garage was my father's private place, his sanctuary. Growing up, I was alternately intimidated and fascinated by it. For whatever reason, it always reminded me of the magical and chaotic sorcerer's workshop in the Disney movie *Fantasia*. A narrow homemade workbench lined much of the far wall. Hanging above it, covering every available inch of mounted pegboard, were dozens of tools and gadgets, mysteriously labeled and organized in ways I still don't understand to

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this day. At opposite ends of the bench, tucked against the wall and stacked atop each other, were four cube-shaped organizers featuring rows of small plastic drawers, each neatly labeled and filled with various-sized nuts, bolts, nails, and washers. Attached to either end at the front of the bench was a pair of large steel vises. Underneath were tidy stacks of pre-cut lumber, a number of plastic buckets, and a couple of old step-stools. The garage's remaining wall space was taken up by sheets of leaning plywood, old furniture awaiting repair, and large, dangerous-looking machinery: a table saw with gleaming metal teeth, a twin-belt sander, a router, and drill press. To my friends and me, the machines all resembled sophisticated instruments of torture. Higher up on the walls hung shelf upon shelf, also homemade, stacked with small cardboard boxes, glass jars, and old coffee cans labeled with strips of masking tape bearing my father's all-caps handwriting: *ROPE. TAPE. WIRE. BRACKETS. CLAMPS. BALL BEARINGS*. In other words, the stuff of magic when you're eight years old.

Unfortunately, the rest of the house wasn't nearly as interesting. A small kitchen, dining room, living room, and foyer occupied the first floor. An antique stereo cabinet, housing my father's impressive collection of jazz records, was centered beneath the bay window, and several mahogany bookcases lined the walls. The sofa and accompanying armchair were inexplicably green. Upstairs, there were three modest-sized bedrooms and a bathroom. My bedroom was situated in the far corner with windows facing both the side and back yards. On the lowest level was a prone-to-flooding basement with dark paneled walls, sectional sofa, his and her recliners, a black-and-white marble coffee table on which my father played solitaire most every evening, an RCA television, and a spectacular hand-carved cuckoo clock centered on the back wall.

One of my favorite places in the house was the large screened-in back porch accessible through a sliding glass door off the rear of the dining room. I spent countless summer evenings on that porch—reading comics and paperback books, sorting baseball and football cards, or playing board

games with friends. My mother would bring out a pitcher of homemade lemonade and chocolate chip cookies still warm and gooey from the oven, and my friends and I would feel like kings of the world. We also had sleepovers out there when the weather was warm enough.

Despite my early love of reading, not to mention obsessively watching scary movies and westerns on TV, I was an outdoors boy. From the day we moved in, I spent countless hours beneath the ageless weeping willow tree that stood watch in our side yard, pretending I was Cy Young Award-winning pitcher Jim Palmer of the Baltimore Orioles. I'd use the heels of my old tennis shoes to carve out a pitcher's rubber in the grass, and then I'd go into my best trademark high-leg-kick wind-up and hurl fastball after fastball at a square patch of bare concrete wall, located dangerously close to the basement window. I still consider it a small miracle that I never once broke that window, but the green shutter bordering the window's left edge paid dearly for my youthful arrogance. Dented and battered beyond recognition from hundreds of errant throws—high and inside to my imaginary right-handed batters—it barely managed to cling to the wall with a pair of bent and rusty nails. That beat-up shutter remains a sore subject to this day between my father and me.

The sidewalk that ran in front of my house, parallel to Hanson Road, had thirty-three cracks of various sizes and shapes. The sidewalk that ran alongside Tupelo had nineteen. I knew those walkways like the back of my hand. I'd walked, skateboarded, or biked them every day for twelve years. When we were young boys, my friends and I built ramps with concrete blocks and wooden boards salvaged from construction sites or "borrowed" from my father's workshop, and jumped them on our bikes. More often than not, we were bare-chested with nary a helmet in sight. Once, we even convinced a little kid who lived a few blocks away to do it blindfolded. That didn't end well, and we never tried it again. Sometimes we upped the ante, soaring over trash cans or plastic bags filled with grass and leaves. Other times, we lay down side

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by side on the sidewalk and jumped over each other. Believe me when I say that lying on your back on a sun-blasted slab of concrete with your arms at your sides and your eyes closed, letting your idiot friend who truly believes he's Evel Knievel hurtle over you on a bicycle, is the apex of blind adolescent loyalty.

One summer afternoon, my buddy Norman's older sister, Melody—a local force to be reckoned with as she already had her driver's license and smoked unfiltered cigarettes—swung her Trans Am into the driveway next door, got out, and implored us to let her take a turn. After initially refusing, Norm finally relented and handed over his bright-green, chopper-style Huffy bicycle. I remember it like it was yesterday. David Bowie was blaring from the midnight-black Trans Am's speakers as Melody rode all the way up the hill on Tupelo and didn't turn around until she'd reached the fire hydrant at the corner of Cherry Court. Then, she'd started pedaling. Fast. Too fast. My friends and I stood on the curb, slack-jawed with awe, as she hit the base of the ramp at a good twenty-five miles per hour and hurtled through space at least fifteen or twenty feet up in the air, her long, dirty-blond hair streaming out behind her like a superhero cape. When the Huffy's tires met the earth again with a loud *twack*, we all cheered and then quickly went quiet again as the tires immediately began to shimmy and wobble out of control. Before any of us could shout a warning to watch out for the traffic on Hanson Road, the bike—with Melody now hanging on for dear life—crashed into the stop sign at the corner, flinging her onto the sidewalk like a rag doll. En masse, we sprinted to her side, certain that we were about to see our first dead body. Instead, she propped herself up on one skinned elbow, her splayed legs and right forearm a pulpy mess of bloody road rash, and started laughing. We couldn't believe it. Not only was she still alive, she thought the whole damn thing was hilarious. Talk about a freakin' legend.

Norm was the only one unimpressed. Furious because the frame of his bike—a recent birthday present from his parents—was twisted into

an ugly and clearly unrepairable pretzel shape, he let loose with a barrage of colorful language. Most of which I heard about later because, I have to admit, I was barely paying attention. Instead, I stood there in my side yard, eyes wide, staring down at the deliciously tan flesh of Melody's bare torso, which had been generously exposed when the orange tank top she was wearing had been pushed up and torn away after contacting the sidewalk. Above that flat, smooth, tanned tummy of hers, I could just make out a deep-red sliver of lacey bra cupping a pale mound of bare breast—the first brassiere and boob this nine-year-old had ever laid eyes on in real life. My eyes were glued to all of this like a dirty old man at a crowded beach until she finally made it to her feet, brushed herself off, climbed back into her Trans Am, and drove away. It was one of the greatest days of my young life.

My father was a big believer that people should take good care of the things they owned. It was a matter of pride with him. Our cars were always washed and waxed, and the interior and exterior of the house was uniformly tidy. But I think he reserved his most special attention for the lawn. He'd fertilize in the spring and fall, trim the bushes and trees on a regular basis, pick up fallen limbs after summer thunderstorms, edge the grass along the sidewalks (he was particularly conscientious about this task, oftentimes carving deep trenches on each side of the walkways that inevitably snagged our bike tires, causing more than a handful of spectacular, high-speed accidents; I'm still not convinced this wasn't intentional on his part), and mow the grass once a week like clockwork with an almost religious fervor.

As luck would have it, we had one of the largest yards in the neighborhood and, much to my father's chagrin, it served as a frequent playground for my friends. We played everything from Wiffle ball and kickball to miniature golf and war. Permanent base paths, in the shape of a diamond, were worn into my father's precious lawn. Old dog-chewed Frisbees and trash can lids served as bases. The sagging telephone wire that stretched across Tupelo Road served as automatic

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home run territory. The ground often shook under our feet as we played, and the muffled *thump* of faraway explosions could be heard as weapon testing operations commenced at Edgewood Arsenal. It wasn't unusual for squadrons of fighter planes or helicopters to fly above our heads on their way to or from Aberdeen Proving Ground—where my father worked the early shift as an aircraft mechanic. When that happened, we inevitably stopped whatever we were doing and pretended to shoot them down with invisible machine guns and bazookas.

I often set up magic shows in the breezeway, charging attendees ten cents a head, and makeshift carnivals in the side yard, using old, discarded toys and comic books as game prizes—all in an attempt to pry loose change from the younger kids' pockets. I also set up a card table on the sidewalk at the corner of Hanson and Tupelo and hawked waxed paper cups of ice-cold lemonade to passing drivers.

A mature plum tree and a tangled cluster of crab apple trees grew in the front corner of the yard, supplying us with plenty of ammunition for our frequent neighborhood battles. The trees also provided perfect cover for bombing cars. If there was one weakness I had as a young man, one bad habit I was unable to break no matter how many times I'd been caught and lectured and punished, it was throwing crab apples or dirt clods or snowballs at passing traffic. I have no explanation for this failing of character other than to say if you've ever lain on your stomach in the cool summer grass waiting for an approaching vehicle, sprung to your feet, hurled a small round object at said vehicle, and then listened to the beautiful *boom* of impact, then you know exactly what I'm talking about. It was even more fun when the drivers pulled over and chased us. For us Hanson Road boys, those were treasured moments of sheer, unbridled joy and adrenaline, and we longed to relive them over and over again. There was a lengthy period of time when I think my flabbergasted father fully believed I was heading for reform school or maybe even prison due to my addiction. After a while, he gave up talking to me about the subject. My sweet mother tried to steer me back with "Why

don't you boys chase fireflies or play marbles?" but by that time those were kiddie games and held little interest. No one was more relieved than my folks when I finally gave up the habit for good only a short time before I left for college.

If the house with green shutters and the ancient weeping willow tree represented the center of my world growing up—the hub of my “wheel of life,” as I later began to think of it—then each road, big or small, leading away from that house resembled a spoke in that ever-turning wheel, every one of them fanning out in a different direction, eventually running out of space to roam, and serving to collectively define the outer boundaries of my beloved hometown.

Regardless of what any map might show, for me, the town of Edgewood stretched from the Courts of Harford Square (about a mile north of my house along Hanson Road) to the shoreline of Flying Point Park bordering the Bush River (a couple miles south of the high school, which was located exactly one mile from my driveway). Yes, the old cliché holds true: my friends and I walked a mile to and from school every day until we were old enough to drive. We'd barely missed, by a block and a half, the cutoff to ride the bus, but we didn't really mind. The long walk gave us more time to screw around before and after school, and delayed the inevitable drudgery of homework. It also gave us additional opportunities to throw small round objects at passing cars, or even better, at school buses.

I was blessed with an army of companions growing up, but my closest friends, my true partners in crime, were Jimmy and Jeffrey Cavanaugh, who lived two houses farther up the hill from me on Hanson Road. The Cavanaughs were crafty and mischievous and a hell of a lot of fun to be around. Brian and Craig Anderson lived right next door to them. Daredevils both, the Anderson brothers were too alike and hot-tempered to really get along on a consistent basis. Two memorable incidents best defined this dynamic. In one instance, a heated argument led to Craig storming upstairs into the kitchen, where he grabbed a

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dirty steak knife from the sink and returned downstairs to stab Brian in the upper thigh. To his credit, it was Craig who bandaged his older brother's leg that day and eventually phoned the ambulance. In the second, Craig, in a moment of pure rage one blisteringly hot summer afternoon, actually dropped his shorts to his ankles and squatted in the middle of Hanson Road, defecated into his cupped hand, and proceeded to chase down his fleeing brother, flinging a handful of fresh poo onto Brian's shirtless back like an ill-tempered monkey in the zoo. I know it sounds disgusting and far-fetched in equal measure, but I was there to witness it—and what an astounding sight it was to behold. I'll never forget it.

Jimmy and Brian were a year behind me in school (Jeff and Craig several years behind their older, but not much wiser, siblings), so the three of us were especially close. Based on advanced age and the ingrained bossiness that comes along with having three older sisters, I usually assumed the leadership role of our small neighborhood crew. Jimmy and Brian never seemed to mind, and I can't remember a single plan of theirs that we didn't enthusiastically embrace as well. Depending on whom you asked, we were either the Three Musketeers or the Three Stooges. People knew us and we knew them—every single kid in our section of Edgewood and most of the grown-ups existed on our daily radar. And we knew *stuff*, too. We knew where the pretty girls lived, where the shortcuts were, which cigarette machines in which gas stations always had extra packs of matches left over in the tray (an invaluable currency of which there was perhaps only one equal: firecrackers), which dumpsters held the most returnable soda bottles, and which tree houses held hidden caches of dirty magazines. We knew which parents spanked their kids and which ones drank too much; which neighbors with swimming pools attended church on Sunday mornings—meaning it was safe for us to pool-hop—and when we were older, which stores would sell us alcohol, where the cops hid with radar guns, and which parking lots were safe for making out with a girl.

A typical summer day for us ran the gamut of youthful adventure. We played every outdoor sport known to man, and some others that we invented out of sheer boredom. We popped tar bubbles on the road with our toes. Cheated at Marco Polo in the Cavanaugh's aboveground swimming pool. Fished in the nearby creeks, ponds, and rivers. Explored the endless woods, and built secret underground forts. Sometimes, our good friend Steve Sines would join us and bring along his father's .22 semiautomatic rifle. We'd spend long afternoons hunting for crows and vultures in the woods or shooting at empty cans and bottles. Other times, we'd practice responsible gun safety by pointing at each other's shoes and yelling, "Jump!" before pulling the trigger and blasting the dirt where our friend's feet had stood only seconds earlier. It's a miracle we still have all our toes.

Other days, we might shimmy up a drainage pipe onto the roof of Cedar Drive Elementary and pretend we were standing on a snow-covered mountaintop in a faraway land. Or we'd climb a similar drainage pipe to the top of the Texaco gas station at the junction of Hanson and Edgewood Roads and moon the passing drivers (that particular stunt screeched to a regretful halt one memorable afternoon when my father spotted the glare of our skinny, pale asses on his way home from work. I was grounded for a week).

You have to understand this about living in a small town like Edgewood: boredom made for strange bedfellows, and there was often little rhyme or reason to the things we did. One summer, along with our old friend Carlos Vargas, we created an exclusive group called the Daredevil Club. For some unknown reason, the initiation rites involved throwing miniature Matchbox cars into random neighbors' swimming pools under the cover of darkness. Another time, we became weirdly obsessed with collecting toads in empty peanut butter jars. I also once spent an entire July afternoon walking around shirtless with a dead, six-foot-long black snake hanging around my neck. I even tried to enter several stores,

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but was turned away. No one—including myself—knows why I did this, but it didn't really matter. It was all fun in the moment.

The Edgewood Shopping Plaza, located several blocks from our houses and directly across the street from the library, also provided many hours of interesting entertainment. There was Plaza Drugs, where we bought most of our candy and all of our comic books and baseball and football cards. I also purchased every one of my Mother's Day gifts at that store from the time I was old enough to walk there by myself until I turned sixteen and got my driver's license. There was a liquor store that also sold the most amazing pizza subs (over a foot long and melted to cheesy perfection) for a couple of bucks, and a laundromat with an old-fashioned candy machine in the back that dispensed packs of Bubble Yum for the unbelievably low price of a dime (a pack ran twenty-five cents in most other places, so I pumped handfuls of dimes into that machine several times a week and then sold the individual pieces for a nickel each at school, thus earning a lovely profit that inevitably went back into more pizza subs). Saving the best for last, there was an honest-to-God pool hall (owned by our friend Brook Hawkins's father) where we played pinball and learned to shoot eight-ball and searched for quarters that the drunks dropped onto the filthy carpet. The lights were dim, the tipplers plentiful, and there were almost always coins to be found.

Outside, at the bottom of the shopping center's parking lot, a group of older boys had built a ten-foot skateboard ramp with eighteen inches of vert, and thanks to the rows of streetlights, we rode that ramp day and night. Sometimes carloads of girls even showed up to watch and cheer us on.

Suffice to say, the Cavanaughs and Andersons didn't spend much time at the library across the street, but you couldn't keep me away. I'd kick back in the overstuffed chairs in the Adult section and devour book after book. General George Armstrong Custer was a favorite early

subject, as was almost anything about the Old West, the Civil War, and unexplained phenomena. I found myself attracted to mysteries and crime stories, and wholeheartedly believed in ghosts and werewolves, the Loch Ness Monster and Bigfoot.

One Saturday afternoon, a bona fide Bigfoot hunter from somewhere out west came to town and set up a large exhibit in a back corner of the library. A slow talking, stoop-backed fellow with an unruly salt-and-pepper mustache and one long bushy eyebrow, he gave a fascinating talk, and shared with us photographs and maps and drawings and even a clump of authentic Bigfoot fur attached to a bulletin board with a thumbtack. I'd somehow convinced Jimmy to go along with me that day, and we sat in the center of the front row, paying rapt attention. When the talk was finished, Jimmy and I huddled in between two rows of nearby bookshelves, put our heads together, and came up with a plan. We quickly returned to the exhibit area, where the guest speaker was posing for photographs and chatting with a handful of admirers. Jimmy gave me a nod and proceeded to activate step one of said plan by creating a diversion—to this day, I can't recall exactly what that entailed, but I believe it may have involved dropping to the floor and faking a seizure. Once a concerned crowd had gathered around my flopping friend, I slipped behind the exhibit table and snatched several strands of authentic Bigfoot hair and stuffed them deep into my pocket. Minutes later, we made our escape and no one was the wiser. I tell this story here for the first time with an unapologetic mixture of pride and shame. I still have no idea what became of that clump of authentic Bigfoot hair. If I had to guess, I can envision my mother probably finding it in one of my desk drawers, wrinkling her nose and shaking her head as she threw it away.

For me, after hanging out at either the library or the Edgewood Shopping Plaza, there were two ways to get back home again. The first involved crossing Edgewood Road at the main traffic light and traveling several blocks along Hanson Road. This was the route we'd take if

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we were riding bikes or skateboards. But if we were walking, we always took the shortcut.

That involved crossing a dangerous section of Edgewood Road right next to the shopping center and walking up the long gravel driveway of the dreaded Meyers House. Once past that monstrosity, we'd cut across a pair of backyards—one small, one not-so-small—and find ourselves standing on the sidewalk alongside Tupelo Road, a mere one block away from my house.

Every small town has a haunted house—a place where horrific things were rumored to have happened, where bad things still lingered, and your heart trip-hammered and arm hairs stood on end every time you walked past it. For us, that was the Meyers House. Built more than two hundred years before any of us were born, and purported to be the original home of a nineteenth-century coven of witches, the Meyers House was a massive Victorian structure with a wide, deeply shadowed wraparound porch, twin gabled peaks, and dozens of windows that watched over the town with a foreboding intensity. During the day, the place was bearably unsettling. You felt the house watching you, measuring you, but you also knew (hoped) that it wouldn't actually make a move. Not in broad daylight—it was smarter and more sinister than that.

At night it was an altogether different story. The house loomed over us in the darkness, hungry and alert and sly, and to dare walk past it was a terrifying odyssey that only the bravest of neighborhood kids would even consider undertaking. “Brave” certainly wasn't a word many people would've used to describe us, but we did it anyway out of a combination of pure laziness (a shortcut was a shortcut, after all) and a masochistic desire to torture ourselves.

It was during those long, slow, breathless walks up that gravel driveway that I first began telling scary stories to my friends. I'd start slowly with a series of mundane incidents, building the narrative gradually, sprinkling interesting tidbits along the way, and timing the pace so that

the most awful and terrifying shocks would occur just as we were passing close to the house. Most often, by that point, it was Jimmy who was begging me, “*Please stop, for God’s sake, Chiz, just stop it!*” I rarely listened. Sometimes, I’d even glance over my shoulder, eyes bulging at a horrible sight unseen, and let loose with a bloodcurdling scream. Then I’d take off, running for home. By the time we hit the corner of Hanson and Tupelo, our screams had usually turned to paralyzing laughter, and we couldn’t wait until the next time to endure it all again.

As it went with most small towns, Edgewood had plenty of odd stories and full-blown legends making the rounds. Some years ago, when I was in elementary school, a young girl, distraught over an unwanted pregnancy, supposedly killed herself by standing on the railroad tracks behind the high school and allowing a speeding train to run her down. Since then, many witnesses claim to have seen or heard the girl’s ghost roaming around in the nearby woods. A close and dependable friend of ours, Bob Eiring, swears to this day that he saw a group of white-robed scientists conducting an experiment on an honest-to-God alien when he snuck into an off-limits area on Edgewood Arsenal and peeked into a warehouse window. He claimed the creature had a head the size of a bicycle tire and light-blue powdery skin. We didn’t believe him at first, but he spent a couple weeks at the library sifting through old newspaper files and came back with a stack of black-and-white photocopied articles from the 1960s and ’70s reporting similar rumors about top-secret extraterrestrial studies being conducted at the Arsenal. So his veracity couldn’t be easily challenged. Not with all that evidence.

No one seemed to know when the Rubberband Man first made an appearance in Edgewood—I asked my sisters, and they’d originally heard about him back when they were teenagers—but all the kids I knew were scared to death of him. It was unclear if the Rubberband Man was actually human or some sort of supernatural creature or perhaps even a mutated mistake that had escaped from a laboratory at Edgewood Arsenal. If you listened to the whispers—and it goes with-

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out saying that we sure as hell did—the Rubberband Man was almost seven feet tall and painfully thin. His arms were like twigs and hung stiffly at his side. His hair was midnight dark and short and bristly. His eyes were black slits and his mouth was a grim, straight line. No one had ever seen his teeth. No one, that is, who'd ever lived to tell about it. The Rubberband Man was always dressed in dark clothes and liked to prowl secluded playgrounds and open fields at dusk, looking for children to steal away and devour. Once, when I was seven, I'd been playing hide-and-seek with friends at the church playground down the street from my house. There was a pair of brightly painted concrete tunnels, each about twelve feet long, positioned not far from the swings. When we were really little, we used to pretend that they were submarines. That evening, I hid inside one of the tunnels. After a while, when no one came to find me, I peeked outside and will swear on a stack of Bibles that I spotted a freakishly tall, lanky figure emerging from the woods across the way. After fifteen or twenty yards, the figure abruptly changed direction and started trudging toward the playground. Suddenly very afraid, I ducked back inside the tunnel and scooted toward the middle, remaining perfectly still. A few minutes later, I smelled a terrible, sour stench, like a basket of rotted fruit left out in the sun too long. I held my breath, trying not to gag, and remained motionless as a pair of spider-thin legs dressed in tattered black pants shuffled past the mouth of the tunnel. I waited what felt like an hour until I could no longer hear the footsteps, and then counted to fifty inside my head just to be sure before making a frantic break for the road. I found my friends fooling around in front of Bob Eiring's house and told them what'd happened. A short time later, we all returned to the playground with Brian Anderson's father at our side. There was no sign of the strange figure anywhere. But I'm not crazy. I know what I saw. And smelled.

And then, of course, there was the Phantom Fondler. I was away at college when it all started, but I'd been able to keep up with the story,

thanks to weekly issues of the *Aegis* that my mom saved for me. In fact, it was a reporter from the *Aegis* who first came up with the “Phantom Fondler” moniker. Since August 1986, someone had entered the homes of at least two-dozen Edgewood women and touched their feet, legs, stomach, and hair while they were sleeping. In each case, when the woman awakened, the man fled from the house and disappeared into the night. Thus far, local police had been unable to capture or identify the assailant.

These stories—and many others I could tell you—offer a mere glimpse into the darker nature of my hometown. Despite my somewhat biased viewpoint, my vision of Edgewood was not entirely colored by the haze of nostalgia or the golden-tinted memories of Norman Rockwellian Americana bliss. As in most small towns, there was crime and violence, treachery and secrets, tragedy and disappointment. There was a wrong side of the tracks to live on, and places where you didn’t want to find yourself alone after dark. When I first got to college, I was shocked to find that most of the guys in my dormitory had never been in a fistfight before; I’d been in a dozen or more by the time I graduated high school. Speaking of which, the principal had been arrested for embezzlement during my sophomore year and actually sentenced to real prison time. A couple of years earlier, a middle school teacher had been arrested for a string of armed bank robberies in Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Delaware, crimes committed during his days off.

Unlike the majority of Harford County, and due to our proximity to Edgewood Arsenal, we were a diverse community, thanks to the large number of military families that moved in and out with increasing frequency. A large population of African Americans and Hispanics called Edgewood home and attended schools there, and even in these modern, supposedly enlightened times, their very presence was enough to intimidate certain people. When I was old enough to drive, more than a handful of the out-of-town girls I dated weren’t allowed to attend parties or sporting events in Edgewood. “No offense” was the usual excuse

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their parents told me. I smiled politely and took the girls there anyway. My senior year, when the Edgewood High School lacrosse team won its first state championship in school history, students from the nearby and much-more-affluent Fallston taunted us from the bleachers, chanting, “*It’s all riiight, it’s okaay, you’ll all work for us one dayyy!*” That kind of elitist attitude only served to strengthen the Edgewood bond—it was us against the world, and we liked it that way. We were more than just a community—we were a family. No, we didn’t drive fancy cars and live in huge houses with manicured yards. Our parents didn’t belong to country clubs or business organizations; they were members of the American Legion and the PTA. And for me and my friends, that was perfectly okay; a source of blue-collar pride, and the way it was supposed to be.

There are two special memories of Edgewood that remain forever imprinted on my soul. The first occurred when I was only five, not long after we moved here. It was a chilly night in December and several inches of freshly fallen snow blanketed the ground. After dinner, my father and I shrugged on our heavy winter coats, ski caps, gloves, and boots, and headed outside. Most of the driveways and sidewalks had been shoveled clean. Christmas lights glowed in the windows and along the rooftops of a handful of houses lining Hanson Road. There was little traffic, and a peaceful hush hung in the air. Hand in hand, neither of us saying much, my father and I walked up Tupelo, past Cherry Court and Juniper Drive, until we reached the corner at the top of the big hill on Bayberry. My father turned to his left and stared down the hill. Watching him, I did the same—and was stunned by what I saw. Every house, as far as I could see, on both sides of the street, was lit up by multicolored Christmas lights, many of them blinking cheerily. Front yards of glistening snow shone with a kaleidoscope of brilliant colors—red and green, blue and yellow, silver and gold. A cluster of carolers sang “Silent Night” in the front yard of one of the houses, and a big plastic

Santa surrounded by flying reindeer swayed in a gentle breeze atop the roof of another nearby house.

I live here, I remember thinking. *This place is my home . . . and it's magic, and I never want to leave.* My father, sensing my breathless wonder, squeezed my hand. I did the same right back, and after standing there for a while longer, we wandered down the street together, taking in the sights.

Coincidentally, the second special memory I've tucked safely away also occurred on a snowy winter evening. I was fifteen, and my friends and I had spent a long, chilly afternoon sledding on the series of hills surrounding Cedar Drive Elementary School just down the street from our houses. A water tower stood at the summit of the largest hill, and its long, spindly legs always filled my head with menacing images of rampaging aliens from one of my all-time favorite movies, *The War of the Worlds*. I'd had frequent nightmares about that tower when I was little, but I was older and braver now, and all alone on the hill, my friends having gone home a short time earlier for dinner. A handful of other neighborhood kids had stayed behind with me, but at some point in the past twenty minutes or so, they too had vanished and I'd been too busy having fun to notice. Hungry, tired, and half-frozen, I took one final trip down the hill and started for home.

As I reached the peak of one of the smaller hills at the base of the tower, it began to snow again, and through the trees I caught sight of my house in the distance, some three blocks away. Blinking red Christmas bulbs glowed along the gutters of the roof. The tall, bushy trees on each side of the driveway were draped with pinpricks of twinkling green. Rectangles of pale light shone in the bay window and pair of smaller basement windows. I stopped walking, catching my breath, transfixed. I imagined my mother preparing dinner in the kitchen, humming to a Christmas song on the radio, my father downstairs on the sofa, watching the news and playing a game of solitaire. I stood there motionless in the falling snow and glanced around—there were

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no cars moving on Hanson Road, not a single person in sight, the world all around me completely silent except for the rhythmic ticks of icy snowflakes landing on my waterlogged coat. It was a lonely feeling—a somehow melancholy feeling. I looked up at my house again—and for the first time in my young life, it hit me.

Standing there in that frozen moment of space and time, I realized how vast the world around me really was and that one day soon I'd be leaving this place I'd always called home, to venture out on my own. My friends would also be scattered to the four winds, and some I would never see or talk to again. Our parents and brothers and sisters would grow old and eventually we'd have to say goodbye to them, too. Nothing would ever be the same.

My breath caught in my throat, and suddenly my eyes misted and my legs wavered. All at once, I was five years old again, only this time my father wasn't standing next to me, reaching over to take hold of my hand. I remember telling myself in that moment that everything was going to be okay, that I was going to grow up and be happy and one day become a writer, and the words I put down on paper were going to help people make sense of this world.

I've no idea how much longer I stood there in the midst of the snowstorm. All I remember is that at some point, and without realizing what I was doing, I started walking again, my sled tucked underneath my arm, and eventually I made it home in time for dinner.

Although I've often thought about that moment over the years, I've never spoken or written about it until now.

(A great deal of the historical insight included in the first section of this chapter can be found within the pages of two fine books: *Edgewood, Maryland: Then and Now* by Jeffrey Zalbreith; and *Images of America: Edgewood* by Joseph F. Murray, Arthur K. Stuempfle, and Amy L. Stuempfle. I highly recommend both volumes.)



ABOVE: Edgewood Meadows sign at the junction of Bayberry Drive and Edgewood Road *(Photo courtesy of the author)*



LEFT: Weapons testing at Edgewood Arsenal
(Photo courtesy of The Baltimore Sun)

RIGHT: The old Edgewood railroad station *(Photo courtesy of The Aegis)*



LEFT: The Meyers House
(Photo courtesy of Alex Baliko)

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ABOVE: Cedar Drive military housing (*Photo courtesy of the author*)



LEFT: The Edgewood Library
(*Photo courtesy of The Aegis*)



ABOVE: The author's home on Hanson Road (*Photo courtesy of the author*)