Pareidolia
by hal incandenza

Summary

It starts as a profile of paranormal investigator and professional skeptic Dr. Hermann Gottlieb. But it seems the further journalist Newt Gesizler delves into his cases, the more mysterious Dr. Gottlieb becomes. What is he hiding? What is he looking for? What is the truth? What is the difference between a journalist's idea of truth, and a scientist's?

Seeing is not believing. Believing is believing.
This story is a rewrite of The Black Tapes Podcast with Hermann and Newt in the roles of Strand and Alex, respectively. (Some other PR characters may appear as well.) As such, you don't need to know anything about TBTP to read! You just have to love ghosts!

I have a complete fourteen-episode/two-season arc planned out. If you do know anything about TBTP, you know that "complete" is not a word that describes it by any means. So though some chapters are closely based on some episodes, the majority will be more original. I'll be shortening the Dr. G arc, writing some of my own case files, and adapting the background mythology to the New England setting. Basically, I'm taking what I like from TBTP and rubbing my little gay hands all over it. So stick around! It should be fun.

Dedicated to my drift partner Haley and my egg partner Sasha. Love you guys <3

SEASON 1, EPISODE 1: A TALE OF TWO FACES (PART 1)

PUB 28 JUN 2012

(Quiet, mysterious music fades up. Sound of distant church bells. Voiceover, MALE REPORTER, 30s. His tone is friendly but removed, self-possessed. He has his own thing going on, but you are welcome to listen in.)

REPORTER: The paranormal. Pseudoscience. In an era of unprecedented scientific knowledge, and near-universal access to it, these concepts fascinate us more than ever. But even the terms—"para" normal, "pseudo" science—connote a deviation from an implied baseline. What if that baseline changed? What if in twenty, fifty years, the lines denoting science and normal were expanded to explain these phenomena that today, we find strange and inexplicable?

Doesn’t it seem like just yesterday, lightning was a mystery, and eclipses were a sign from God?

From CTC Studios and the WGBH Podcast Network, I’m Newton Geiszler. Welcome to The Black Tapes Podcast.

(Theme music begins: acoustic guitar, faraway female voice singing.)

GEISZLER: First, let’s start where we started. When we pitched this new podcast to the network, we did not envision an X-Files vs Serial mashup-showdown. It was in fact pitched as a series of interview profiles of New Englanders with interesting jobs and occupations. First on our list was paranormal investigator. Now, listeners, was that my idea? Of course it was. I’ve always been a big nerd for UFO stories, and I watch my fair share of exorcism movies and ghosthunting shows. An avid fan, perhaps, but only a fan—not a believer. My beliefs sit firmly in the realm of science.
So what about people whose beliefs do not? Or rather, whose bounds of ‘science’ are different than mine?

“Science is not a matter of belief,” any scientist will tell you. To that, I might say, “It is a matter of belief—in the scientific method.” To which they might say, “Who are you and how did you get into my office in the first place?” But yes—they too are acting on belief: belief in the power of the tested hypothesis. You ask a question, collect data, and see what answer you get. That question could be how a certain slime mold reproduces, or whether a certain building is haunted. If you believe in the method, all you have to do is collect that data.

But just how rigorous is that data collection in the paranormal investigation business, you may ask?

We had the same question.

(interlude #1 music plays)

(inquisitive knocking is heard)

(sound of a door opening)

MALE VOICE: Come in.

NEWT GEISZLER: Hello?

MAN: Hi, are you the reporter?

NEWT: In the flesh. Newt. (sound of chairs moving) You must be Dr. Dedekind.

DR. DEDEKIND: Good to meet you, Newt. Please, call me Dana.

NEWT: Charmed! You were of course, named after Dr. Dana Scully?

(Dedekind laughs, somewhat nervously)

NEWT (VOICEOVER): Dr. Dana Dedekind is a well-known writer in the paranormal field. He positions himself as neither skeptic nor believer, instead choosing to play the “middle” and present both sides in his books. Of which he has published twelve—number thirteen forthcoming. He sat down with us in his office at Amherst College.

DEDEKIND: 45% of Americans today believe in ghosts. 64% believe in life after death, and 43% believe that ghosts are capable of interacting with living people, even harming them. We tend to think of ourselves as a scientifically enlightened culture—but that’s a staggering number of people who still believe in the so-called supernatural.

NEWT: And a staggering number of available pockets, huh?

DEDEKIND: (taken aback) Sorry?

NEWT: Ghost-hunting is a multi-million dollar industry. There are at least five network reality ghost hunting shows on right now. You can even buy a ghosthunting kit at Walmart—beginner and intermediate level. EMF meter and everything.

DEDEKIND: (laughs) Oh, of course.
NEWT: ...To say nothing of book sales.

DEDEKIND: Um...

NEWT (VO): We picked three paranormal quote-unquote "experts" to interview. In actuality, we picked four, but one of them proved... difficult to sit down with. Don’t worry—more on that later.

DEDEKIND: Most experts will break it down like this. Hauntings come in one of three types: residual energy, intelligent haunting, and inhuman haunting.

WOMAN: In general, in what you refer to as ‘paranormal encounters,’ we get three types: orbs or mist, full-body apparitions, and demonic presence.

NEWT (VO): That’s Dr. Marcia Cantor, another paranormal researcher and author, based at UVM. She falls more firmly on the believer side of the spectrum.

MAN: I’ve been back and forth and up and down this country tracking down ghosts and demons. I’ve seen them myself—not many times, but enough. My research is substantiated. And I’ve seen it firsthand. So I know that anyone who tells you there’s three types of hauntings is full of [expletive bleeped].

NEWT (VO): That’s Mark Grandi, celebrated ghosthunter and host of the popular ghost-hunting web series, Bat Out Of Hell.

(Grandi interview)

NEWT: So, critics heckle. They say, “Mark, you’re nuts. You’re seeing what you want to believe. You’re doing it for the attention.” What do you say?

GRANDI: I say you’re just jealous you didn’t think of it first. And maybe, I invite them to join us on an expedition. So that they can see the experiments we conduct—we conduct actual experiments, you know...

(Cantor interview)

NEWT: Marcia, when critics say your field is not a science, but more of a pseudoscience, what do you say?

CANTOR: I point out that even the University of Pennsylvania, an Ivy League school, has a ghost research unit.

NEWT: Does it really?

(Grandi interview resumes)

GRANDI: ...the kind of critics we hear from constantly, like, it’s not even worth it anymore. You know. Like Gottlieb. Are you talking about Gottlieb? Don’t waste your time with that guy.

NEWT (VO): I was not. Not talking about Gottlieb, that is. Not yet. But we started hearing his name almost immediately—and it didn’t stop coming up.

(Dedekind interview)

NEWT: Tell me, Dana-Not-Scully. Does the criticism get personal?
DANA: Certainly. Academia can be vicious. Especially in a field like this, where the borders are contentious—after all, is the paranormal academic? Can it properly be considered as such? I’d say that ambiguity makes this arena even more contentious. The worst are those academics on the sidelines, the ones trying to define the borders, tell us what is and is not science—Gottlieb, or Strand. It’s like they have a vendetta against the whole field. But you know Gottlieb’s reputation, of course...

(Cantor interview)

CANTOR: Dr. Gottlieb is well-known in our circles, though probably not in the way he hopes. I think he considers himself a gatekeeper, or maybe the philosopher on the other side of our field’s socratic dialogue. Most paranormal researchers I know, though, consider him more of an... overzealous referee.

(Grandi interview)

GRANDI: Dr. Hermann Gottlieb? What’s his doctorate in, being an arrogant [expletive bleeped]? NEWT (VO): Dr. Hermann Gottlieb. Our mysterious fourth expert. It was around this time he caught my eye—but he was as hard to find as a haunted amulet in a haystack.

(Female voice, tinny through telephone): You’ve reached the offices of the Gottlieb Institute. Please leave a message.

NEWT (VO): Academic referee is actually a good description of Dr. Gottlieb. He is a paranormal investigator, but what makes him so unusual—and so controversial—is that he does not believe in the supernatural. He is a professional, fully qualified skeptic. Over the past decade he has made it his mission to debunk any and all claims of the paranormal. He’s not just a ghost hunter: he’s a ghost buster.

And the good doctor puts his money where his mouth is. Since 2001 the Gottlieb Institute has been offering a prize for definitive proof of the supernatural. No one has yet claimed it—though many have tried.

So, as you can imagine, between the research and the race for the prize, Dr. Gottlieb has not made many friends in the ghosthunting community. Here he is at a conference in 2010.

(Sounds of a crowded room, agitated audience, staticky sound system. A man’s voice, pointed and vaguely British-accented: the elusive DR. GOTTLIEB.)

DR. GOTTLIEB: The Wilfred case neither proves nor disproves this phenomenon. All we have here is a number of witnesses, making claims. Few of them concurring. Witness testimony is not empirical evidence. It simply is not good science.

MODERATOR: Next question for Dr. Gottlieb? Yes, in the red shirt.

WOMAN: (shouting to be heard) Let’s accept what you say, let’s just discount all that your fellow panelists have said, let’s accept that they are engaging in “bad science.” What exactly have you brought to the table?

(scattered audience applause)

DR. GOTTLIEB: I think you will find that I do not, in fact, need to bring anything to the table. It is not I who has made extraordinary claims against the established laws of nature. The burden of proof does not lie with me. You would not ask me to prove the force of gravity, heliocentrism, cellular
senescence. These are facts we trust. The burden of proof lies with my colleagues here—it is up to them to prove, if they can, that life does not end after death. They have not done so. The evidence is simply not there.

WOMAN: Why not let people take comfort in fairy tales?

DR. GOTTLIEB: Because it is intellectually irresponsible and culturally regressive.

MAN: *(shouting from audience)* Have you ever come across a case you haven’t been able to debunk?

DR. GOTTLIEB: *(slight pause)* No. Never.

NEWT (VO): Dr. Gottlieb is an unpopular figure in his chosen field of paranormal research. Why do it? Why put himself in that position of ridicule? Why does he devote his life to a field he finds “intellectually irresponsible”?*

FEMALE VOICE: *(through phone)* Hi, this is a message for Newton Geiszler. This is Marian calling on behalf of Dr. Gottlieb. I’m afraid we won’t be able to set up an interview at this time. He wanted me to thank you for your interest in his work.

*(interlude #2 music plays)*

NEWT (VO): While we were waiting for news from Dr. Gottlieb through some... alternative channels, my producer and I drove up to UVM for a more in-depth interview with Dr. Marcia Cantor.

*(sounds of chairs moving, shuffling footsteps, pages turning)*

CANTOR: This shelf here is my nonfiction, and books I’ve contributed to...

NEWT: *(reading)* Ghost Hunter's Field Guide, Magic of Monsters, Ethereal Beings in Your Neighborhood, Past Lives and Present Signals... How many books have you written?

CANTOR: Seventeen. Some fiction as well.

NEWT: Do the same themes carry over into your fiction?

CANTOR: No... certainly not. Why would you ask that?

NEWT: ...Well...

*(tense pause)*

CANTOR: I take my work seriously, Mr. Geiszler. My fiction is a hobby. An invention. My work in the paranormal is no such invention.

NEWT: Um, of course. My bad.

NEWT (VO): A lot of paranormal experts have a touchy spot like that. They’re pretty concerned about you taking them seriously—the moment they feel you aren’t, self-defense kicks in. I can understand that. When people dismiss you, year in year out, it takes a toll.

I had to get back in Dr. Cantor's good books. I did that by asking about her actual books—not her fiction, not her nonfiction, but her large, intriguing shelf of scrapbooks.
NEWT: What are these?

CANTOR: These are my personal records of local investigations.

NEWT: Investigations conducted by you?

CANTOR: And my associates, yes. All around the Northeast.

NEWT: May I?

CANTOR: Please.

(sound of sliding, crinkly binding opening, pages turning slowly)

CANTOR: Many of these are location hauntings. There’s a lot of history in this part of the country—a lot of secrets in all those woods. Old foundations. Abandoned buildings still standing. Still occupied. Very old.

NEWT: (still turning pages) These are fascinating photos.

CANTOR: I’m going on an expedition tonight, actually. My team and I are investigating the site of a haunted Revolution-era inn. You and your producer are welcome to come along, if you’re interested.

NEWT: Interested? Haunted revolutionary inn? How could we say no?

NEWT (VO): We did not say no.

(interlude music #1)

FEMALE VOICE: (through phone) Hello. I’m calling on behalf of Steph, Dr. Gottlieb’s publicist. It seems he is unable to meet, but Steph might be able to meet with you to answer some questions about his upcoming book. Please call back at your earliest convenience to set up a meeting. Thank you.

(transition: exterior sounds, wind, cars driving by)

(car door slams)

CANTOR: Hi.

NEWT: Hello! Sorry we’re late, we drove by, but we didn’t think this was the right place. I guess it is?

CANTOR: No, this is it. Let me introduce you to the team.

NEWT (VO): So. Let me set the scene.

When Dr. Cantor said we would be exploring a Revolution-era inn, here’s what I pictured: a white clapboard colonial with iron lamp posts, a mossy foundation, the building half-rotted out, trees growing up through where the floors used to be. But the truth is, the forest takes its territory back much faster than that. A house abandoned to these woods can get swallowed up in fifty years or less. If it wasn’t carefully preserved, there would be nothing left of a building that old except a square of stones in the ground.

But alas, listeners, that did not quell my disappointment when we reached the address
Dr. Cantor gave us, and found an uninspiringly neat and modern strip mall.

CANTOR: This is Diane, she’s our tech. She takes care of lights and EMF readings, sound recording, all that.

DIANA: (coolly) Good to meet you.

CANTOR: And this is Kyle, our medium.

KYLE: (husky voice) Hey.

NEWT: Nice to meet you. I’m Newt. I don’t think I’ve ever met a male medium before.

KYLE: Have you ever met any medium before?

NEWT: Well Kyle, you got me there.

NEWT (VO): Dr. Cantor led our group into the lobby of the bank in the strip mall. It was a quiet part of town. Down the slope you could see the interstate, and above, behind the mall, thick forest. It was about sunset when we arrived—closing time.

This bank, Diane told me, sits on the site of an old Revolution-era inn. It was rumored to be haunted long before it was abandoned, sometime in the 1800s. Employees at the bank had been reporting strange happenings of late: doors opening, cold spots, strange sounds. When I pointed out that there weren’t many significant Revolutionary battles up here in Vermont, she frowned at me. She said it didn’t really have anything to do with the Revolution. The hauntings were just concurrent.

NEWT: So if you don’t think it’s the ghost of a soldier, what do you think is in there?

DIANE: (still sounding annoyed) It could be a soldier. I just don’t want to jump to conclusions. But it may not even be a spirit of the deceased, or ‘ghost,’ as you call it. It could be a spirit of something lesser than a human. Perhaps a portal or vortex spirit.

NEWT: (thoughtfully) Oh. And how do we determine that?

DIANE: We ask.

NEWT (VO): The security guard on last-shift duty let us into the back, then left, locking up behind himself. It was just the five of us: the team, my producer, and me.

After we cased the place, we set up in an office behind a glass. Diane picked that room when, after some thorough EMF scanning, she determined it to be the hottest spot in the building. We sat in a circle, mics, scanners, and cords spidering out around us. Dr. Cantor had us turn out the lights.

Kyle placed two flashlights in the center of the circle. He turned them on: one was blue, one was red. Then he unscrewed the lids of each flashlight just enough to turn them off. He explained what he was doing: apparently this is a common ghost-hunting-slash-clairvoyant trick. If the ghosts or spirits want to talk, all they have to do is nudge the flashlight slightly and turn it back on.

Without the flashlights, the room was densely dark. Night had fallen by then. The only light came from the streetlights outside the window in the other room, filtering through our glass wall. The only sound was the distant highway traffic and the sounds of the
woods. We were standing on the site of a haunted inn, two-hundred-plus-years gone, in the dark, waiting to talk to spirits. I was pretty psyched.

CANTOR: *(addressing the spirit)* My name is Marcia Cantor. I’d like to speak with you, if I may. If you’d like to speak to us, could you please turn one of the lights on?

*quiet gasp, probably from Newt*

NEWT (VO): The red light turned on. We were all looking at it—no one had touched it. It was wild.

CANTOR: *(calm)* Thank you. Now please turn it off.

NEWT (VO): A few seconds went by, and then the red light turned off.

CANTOR: Thank you. Now, before we begin our conversation, I’d like the blue light to be yes, and the red light to be no. Is this all right with you?

NEWT (VO): Now the blue light flashed on. ‘Yes.’ I could hardly believe it.

WOMAN: Neither could I. But we went over every inch of that place. We looked for remotes, switches, and I watched Kyle and Diane. They never moved. Whoever was faking, it wasn’t them.

NEWT: *(fondly)* That’s my producer, Mako. She was not as excited as I was.

MAKO: *(skeptically)* Of course, there had to be some explanation. A flight path? The interstate? Underground pipes? Something had to be shaking those lights.

NEWT: I think underground pipes is a stretch to explain what happened next.

DIANE: Oh my god. Look.

*(someone gasps)*

KYLE: The door!

*(BANG—loud clatter and commotion)*

NEWT (VO): *(amused)* Wanna tell them what happened, Mako?

MAKO: It felt like everything happened at the same second. First, the battery died on my zoom recorder. I was standing next to Newt. So I ducked behind him to get batteries out of our equipment bag, and of course, right at that moment, Diane saw something. Everyone gasped, and then the door opened. Seemingly of its own accord. It startled me, and I tripped over some wires, and knocked over some equipment. ...Loudly.

NEWT: *(laughing)* We were all pretty shook up. The door did seem to open by itself—but that wasn’t the weirdest thing, to me. It was what Diane and the others saw right before that.

MAKO: Which was?

NEWT: They said that they saw the apparition on the other side of the glass. They said it was an old man.
MAKO: “They said.” *You* didn’t see it.

NEWT: No. But. They said it left an imprint. An imprint of a face. And I *did* see that. In fact, when the lights came back on, I got a picture of it.

So just like that, we were ghosthunting.

*(interlude music #1 plays)*

NEWT (VO): Both Dr. Cantor and Kyle said they saw an apparition. There was an imprint of something like a face on the glass. Was that strip mall bank really haunted? Stick around. We may have our answer soon. It’s the Black Tapes. I’m Newt Geiszler.

**SPONSOR BREAK #1**

WOMAN: Hi. How can I help you?

NEWT: Hi! I’m Newt Geiszler. This is my producer, Mako Mori. We’re with the GBH podcast network. I left a few messages for Steph.

WOMAN: More than a few, I think.

NEWT: *(laughs)*

WOMAN: *(does not laugh)*

*(beat)*

NEWT: So is she available?

WOMAN: Have a seat. I’ll tell her you’re here.

NEWT (VO): After trying various channels, we were able to get an interview with Stephanie Hubble. She is Dr. Gottlieb’s publicist. It turned out, she was a fan of a certain late-night punk rock show hosted by a certain someone I know...

WOMAN: Hi, I’m Steph. You must be Mr. Geiszler.

NEWT: Please, Newt! Glad to meet you, Steph!

STEPH: ….Which makes *you* the host of Stranger Danger! I can’t believe it! It is such a treat to meet you.

MAKO: That’s me! DJ Lady Danger. *(laughs)* I can’t believe you stay up late enough to listen to my show.

STEPH: I have been listening for *years*, I *adore* it. I work late most Thursdays, so I listen to it driving home. It’s so great.

MAKO: You don’t look like a punk rock fan, I have to say.

STEPH: But *you* look like a punk rock DJ.

MAKO: I’ll take that as a compliment?

STEPH: It is! So listen, what can I do for you? Anything. What is it you need?
NEWT: A half-hour sit-down interview with Dr. Hermann Gottlieb.

(pause)

NEWT: Is he available?

STEPH: (hesitant) He... isn’t doing interviews, currently.

MAKO: ...But?

STEPH: But... I’ll see what I can do. No promises. But for you, I’ll do my best.

(interlude music #3)

Voice of DR. HERMANN GOTTLIBEB, muffled over phone: Hello. I’m returning one of... twenty-two telephone calls from a Mr. Newton Geiszler. This is Hermann Gottlieb.

NEWT (VO): So. At last, dear listener, after a thousand phone calls, millions of messages, uncountable emails, I found my way to the offices of Dr. Hermann Gottlieb.

His institute is based in Cambridge. I crossed the river and found it—a three-story brick building of ambiguous architectural era, framed by sycamores, perfectly camouflaged in the gray area between MIT and Harvard. His office is on the third floor, looking over the tops of the trees towards the Charles.

(sound of chairs moving, people sitting down)

NEWT: All right if I put the mic here?

DR. GOTTLIEB: (sounding stiff) Certainly.

NEWT: (sitting down) You’re a hard man to reach, Dr. Gottlieb.

DR. GOTTLIEB: Well it seems you’re a harder man to escape, Mr. Geiszler.

NEWT: (laughs)

(beat)

DR. GOTTLIEB: So. What is it you want to know?

NEWT (VO): Dr. Gottlieb is a thin man, medium height, with cropped brown hair and a thoroughly academic air. If you passed him by on the street, you would just know that he was a professor of something, and that you were probably flunking his class. Though he grew up in Lincoln, Massachusetts, Dr. Gottlieb attended boarding school and college in his mother’s native England. Hence the accent you hear.

He has his reading glasses on a chain around his neck. He wears a neat brown suit that he surely stole from the set of a BBC period piece about Edwardian Oxford. He walks with a cane, but he walks fast. There’s a certain kind of energy coiled under that professorial suit.

And his eyes are sharp—almost as sharp as his cheekbones—and constantly searching, as if they see something we could not, or as if they mean to find it.

NEWT: So Dr. Gottlieb, you have degrees in psychology, and religion and mythology. Did you
never study the paranormal, parapsychology?

DR. GOTTLIEB: Of course not. You cannot get a degree in those fields.

NEWT: No?

DR. GOTTLIEB: No. Can you get a degree from the flat earth society? *(Newt laughs)* It is because the so-called paranormal does not hold up under any prolonged empirical scrutiny.

NEWT: Never?

DR. GOTTLIEB: Not ever.

NEWT: Which is why no one has claimed your million-dollar prize.

DR. GOTTLIEB: That’s correct.

NEWT: Talk to me about the prize. What made you set it up?

DR. GOTTLIEB: *(after a pause)* When my father died, he left me the money. I wanted to do something useful with it, in his memory.

NEWT: And what did your father do? Not a ghosthunter, I take it?

DR. GOTTLIEB: *(terse)* He was a businessman of sorts.

NEWT: Tell me, Dr. Gottlieb, as a scientist, doesn’t it interest you more to make discoveries of your own? What makes you so hell-bent on disproving others?

DR. GOTTLIEB: *(flatly)* I’m not interested in that.

NEWT: *(confused)* In?


NEWT: *(slight pause)* Okay. Then... tell me about the cases you get.

NEWT (VO): Listener, there’s two kinds of journalists. Two kinds of people, really. But there are journalists interested in facts, and journalists interested in people. When I finally sat down and looked Dr. Gottlieb in the eye, he already interested me as a subject—intensely. But I realized that, finally, I had found a person who was going to tell me some concrete goddamn facts. I had only been in the business of the paranormal for a few weeks, but I was already swamped in uncertainty and starved for cold hard facts. I didn’t even realize how starved until he started speaking.

His redirection of the conversation was unusual, and maybe even rude, but I found I didn’t care. Dr. Gottlieb interested me, certainly, but he interested me not because of who he was, but because of what he had to say.

DR. GOTTLIEB: Most often, the cases we receive are just someone telling a story. Without evidence, it isn’t much of a case. Sometimes, they describe a site—a home they believe to be haunted, usually. If the story is compelling, my team and I will go investigate the site.

NEWT: EMF reader and all?
NEWT (VO): Dr. Gottlieb’s office had books and tapes and file cabinets, the usual academic wall-dressing, but behind his desk was a shelf of unusual equipment. Some of it I recognized from our bank seance, like the EMF meter and the scopes. Others were more arcane or more advanced. I pointed at them.

DR. GOTTLIEB: (creak as he turns in his chair) All the equipment. We like to stay current on what the so-called believers are using. That way we know how the data can be faked.

NEWT: Huh.

DR. GOTTLIEB: A lot of cases involve photo or video. For those, we have a forensics service we consult.

NEWT: And the results are always negative?

DR. GOTTLIEB: Without exception.

NEWT: (good-natured but challenging) So, unequivocally, you’re saying, there is no such thing as ghosts, never has been?

DR. GOTTLIEB: There has never once in history been a single supernatural event on this planet. When a person thinks they see a ghost, they are reacting to another stimulus. They are reacting to an unresolved history of a location, or they are misplacing their own guilt, or grief, or fear. These reasons have effectively explained countless so-called sightings. Yet has there ever been a single proven case of the so-called paranormal? None.

The public have become so comfortable with our level of scientific knowledge that they feel there is nothing new to learn, they are regressing—it’s just like the people with no expertise who decide the earth is flat, or the people who get bored of a world without plagues and stop vaccinating th—

NEWT: Hang on—stop.

DR. GOTTLIEB: (...)

NEWT: I’m not interested in that.

DR. GOTTLIEB: In?

NEWT: Listening to you pontificate. What I’m interested in is facts.

(sound of chair moving)

NEWT: Talk to me about these.

NEWT (VO): I was pointing to a bookcase on the wall next to me. It was full of white VHS tapes, the plastic kind that clip shut. Each one is labeled with an intriguing title: Poltergeist of State Street, The Inhabited Porch, The Haunting of Mrs. and Mrs. Smith. Inside, there were photos, USB sticks, notecards, various bits of case information; in one, there was an actual VHS tape.

DR. GOTTLIEB: ...These are our solved cases.

NEWT: You have a lot after twelve years.

DR. GOTTLIEB: This is just the past year.

DR. GOTTLIEB: It’s actually slightly below average for us. The rest are in the storage closet.

NEWT: May I?

NEWT (VO): Dr. G took me to the door at the back of his office and showed me into the storage area.

NEWT: Oh my god. How many is this? Thousands? They’re stacked so deep I can’t see how many is on each shelf.

DR. GOTTLIEB: At last count, over two thousand.

NEWT: Good god, Dr. Gottlieb.

DR. GOTTLIEB: You aren’t one for journalistic detachment, are you?

NEWT: (chuckles) Tell me—what are those?

DR. GOTTLIEB: (suddenly sounding uncomfortable again) ...Nothing.

NEWT (VO): At this point, Dr. G shut down our interview. Politely, mostly. But he didn’t really answer any more questions, and I left without a fight. After he promised a follow-up phone interview if I had further questions.

I certainly did. Questions, among other things, about what it was I saw in his storage closet. Stay with us after the break.

SPONSOR BREAK #2

NEWT (VO): I called Dr. Gottlieb back a few days later.

NEWT: Thanks for taking the time.

DR. GOTTLIEB: (over the phone) It’s no trouble.

NEWT: (chipper) There’s just a favor I—apologies—have to ask.

DR. GOTTLIEB: Yes?

NEWT: My intern had an issue with his SD card and we lost the photos. The ones we took of you for our website?

DR. GOTTLIEB: (...)

NEWT: We’ll be in and out. You’ll barely notice me.

DR. GOTTLIEB: ...I doubt that. Come by tomorrow afternoon.

(interlude music #3)

NEWT (VO): Strictly speaking, I did not need to revisit his office for those photos. My producer said we could just use the one from his website. But I wanted an excuse to ask him a few more questions—particularly about something I’d seen in his storage closet.
NEWT: Hi. Thanks for seeing us again.

DR. GOTTLIEB: Hello Mr. Geiszler.

NEWT: Before we get the photo, do you mind if I show you something?

DR. GOTTLIEB: What sort of something?

NEWT: A ghost.

DR. GOTTLIEB: *(humoring him)* Is that so?

NEWT: *(airy)* It's pretty convincing.

DR. GOTTLIEB: Many people are too easily convinced.

NEWT: Listen. I don’t want to oversell it, but I think that prize might be in the bag for me.

NEWT (VO): It worked. He agreed to look. I opened my computer and pulled up my file on our “haunted” Vermont bank. I wanted some answers, and I knew he was the man to give them to me.

NEWT: Last week, I was up at UVM. Some locals took us to the site of an old haunted inn.

DR. GOTTLIEB: The Old Williston Inn?

NEWT: *(impressed)* You do know your hauntings.

DR. GOTTLIEB: *(warmer)* Alleged hauntings.

NEWT (VO): First I showed Dr. G the security footage of the door opening.

NEWT: What do you think?

DR. GOTTLIEB: The door is automatic.

NEWT: It wasn’t. We checked with security.

DR. GOTTLIEB: And they couldn’t have lied?

NEWT: When we looked at the door, we couldn’t find any mechanism.

DR. GOTTLIEB: There’s a lot of ways to fake that. If the door wasn’t automatic, it could have opened due to air pressure changes. It happens all the time when the latch bolt isn’t fully in the slot.

NEWT: Okay, sure. I mean, I’m not sure I buy it, but that wasn’t all.

DR. GOTTLIEB: What else was there?

NEWT: Dr. Cantor's tech had an EMF reader. It was going haywire.

DR. GOTTLIEB: Did the tech set it down?

NEWT: Pardon?

DR. GOTTLIEB: Did the tech hold the meter, or set it in one place?
NEWT: As I remember, she walked around with it and found the place with the most activity.

DR. GOTTLIEB: That is incorrect use of the instrument. They are meant to be set in one place, and left alone. “Ghosthunters” misuse them like that all the time. It renders their data useless.

NEWT: So that accounts for the high levels she measured?

DR. GOTTLIEB: Not entirely, but it does confound them. May I?

NEWT (VO): He took over the laptop and did some very fast typing. He pulled up two maps.

NEWT: What is this?

DR. GOTTLIEB: Cell phone tower map.

NEWT: Why?

DR. GOTTLIEB: Cell phone tower signals disrupt EMF meter readings. And this... (sound of clicking)...this bank is in one of the highest-traffic cross-ping zones in the state. None of those EMF readings were trustworthy.

NEWT: (sounding half-convinced but still game) Alright... So what about this, then?

NEWT (VO): I took back the laptop to locate the photo of the imprint in the window—the one left that looked like a face.

DR. GOTTLIEB: (archly) I seem to recall you saying this would be a quick visit.

NEWT: (audibly typing)...But?

DR. GOTTLIEB: ...But if I had believed that, I would have had to resign my post as the leading skeptic on the eastern seaboard.

NEWT: (laughs) Ha. All right, here it is.

DR. GOTTLIEB: (...)

NEWT: What do you think?

DR. GOTTLIEB: ...Tell me what it is you see in this picture, Mr. Geiszler.

NEWT: Well, in the bank, we were all sitting in a circle. With the lights off. Then the tech saw a figure in on the other side of this window—an apparition, she said. Two of the others saw it too. They said it was a man.

DR. GOTTLIEB: You did not see this apparition?

NEWT: No. But the imprint is real. I mean, obviously. You can see it right here.

DR. GOTTLIEB: What you’ve described to me is not what you see, but the context in which you saw it. Looking at it in isolation, I don’t see anything but some smudges on glass.

NEWT: You don’t see a face?

DR. GOTTLIEB: No.
NEWT: Here. The eyes. And this is the mouth. No?

DR. GOTTLIEB: Pareidolia.

NEWT: Pardon?

DR. GOTTLIEB: Your brain, interpreting random information to fit a pattern. It’s called pareidolia. It’s biologically hardwired into us. Interpreting shapes as faces is one of its most basic forms. Babies interpret the simplest shapes—two dots and a line—as a face from a very early age.

NEWT: You calling me a baby, Dr. G?

DR. GOTTLIEB: Certainly not. What I’m saying is, the combination of hardwired pattern recognition and supernatural context, together, shaped your interpretation of these smudges into a paranormal one. What I see, sans context, as random smudges, you see as the imprint of a ghost’s face.

    NEWT (VO): Loath as I was to admit it, he did have me there. That was a pretty convincing deconstruction. I had one last defense: the flashlight “conversation.” No remotes, I insisted, and no one was touching them. This one, I thought, would definitely get him. I was completely wrong.

DR. GOTTLIEB: This is actually a very common trick. It’s a matter of heat conduction. In those screw-top flashlights, there is a plastic ring. When the light is on, the bulb gets hot. Marcia Cantor unscrews the lid, just enough to turn it off. But that plastic ring expanded while it was hot. Now that the light is off, it cools again, contracting enough to bring the two bits of metal back together. Forming a circuit...

    NEWT: ...And turning the light on.

DR. GOTTLIEB: Exactly. Then the bulb gets hot again, expands the plastic, the light shuts off again, and the cycle continues. Marcia Cantor and television ghosthunters use this trick all the time.

NEWT: Damn. So the whole seance was just a fake-out, then?

DR. GOTTLIEB: Probably not. Not on purpose, I mean. In general, people like her just really want to believe. They warp any data they receive to fit their worldview.

NEWT: Hm. Pareidolia?

DR. GOTTLIEB: Essentially. Here’s what you should do. Show them a picture—say you dug up some portraits of the family that owned the old inn. Show them any old 1700s portrait. I guarantee they will swear they saw the same ghost.

    NEWT (VO): This, I was curious about. The next day I found a portrait one of Benjamin Franklin’s children and emailed it to Dr. Cantor.

NEWT: So, Marcia, my intern dug up a photo of one of the family who used to own the Old Williston Inn.

CANTOR: (over the phone) Oh, that’s interesting.

NEWT: Yeah! I’m sending it to you now so you can take a look. We thought maybe it could be... could be the same man you saw behind the glass.
CANTOR: (after a pause) That’s him.

NEWT: (hesitant) Are you sure?

CANTOR: Absolutely positive. That was the man I saw. I would know him anywhere.

NEWT (VO): Was I disappointed by how handily Dr. G deconstructed our seance? Sure. At first. But I had something else I wanted to ask him about too. Back in his office, I rerouted the conversation. I indicated the row of white VHS cases on his shelf.

NEWT: So is this how you deal with all your (tap tap—Newt is tapping on the plastic spine of one of the tapes) debunked cases? Point by point takedown?

DR. GOTTLIEB: Correct.

NEWT: All of these, disproven.

DR. GOTTLIEB: Correct.

NEWT: So what’s the difference between these white cases and the black ones in your back room?

DR. GOTTLIEB: Those... (sound of shifting in seat) The black cases are for those we don’t yet have the resources or technology to disprove.

NEWT: “...Yet.”

DR. GOTTLIEB: That’s right. We will, sooner, or later. It’s just a matter of time and technology.

NEWT: But none of the people who sent you those black tapes can claim the prize?

DR. GOTTLIEB: No. They don’t stand on their own as proof. I consider them open—cold cases, if you will.

NEWT: I see.

(pause)

NEWT: Could I take a look?

(pause...)

NEWT (VO): Dr. Gottlieb stared at me for a long minute. This was the moment of truth—the point of no return. Would he say yes? Would he share his secret tapes? The whole show depended on it—and so did my sanity.

I had to know. I had to. I tried not to look as desperate as I felt.

But even as he stared me down, I saw it in his eye.

He was going to say yes. I just had to wait.

(outro music fades in)

This is the Black Tapes Podcast. I’m Newt Geiszler.

Next time: we hear Dr. Gottlieb’s first “black tape” case.
See you there.

(music fades out)
A Tale of Two Faces (Part 2)

Chapter Notes

Note 1: fic mix (work-in-progress) is up!
Note 2: Mrs & Mrs Hall's experience is openly plagiarized from my real friends' real life.
So fun so fresh so haunted!

SEASON 1, EPISODE 2: A TALE OF TWO FACES (PART 2)

PUB 26 JULY 2012

(Intro music fades in. Acoustic guitar, church bells, a faraway female voice.)

NEWT: Welcome to the Black Tapes Podcast. I’m Newton Geiszler.

The Black Tapes is in part an exploration of belief and the search for truth, and in part a profile of the founder of the Gottlieb Institute, professional skeptic Dr. Hermann Gottlieb. This is part two of our pilot episode. If you haven’t listened to part one, please go back and do so. No spoilers.

(interlude music #1)

(Recorded sounds, fuzzy from age, of cheerful chatter, laughter, children—a party.)

FEMALE VOICE: Hello, hello sweetie!

CHILD’S VOICE: Firetruck!

FEMALE VOICE: Wow!

CHILD’S VOICE: Got it from Santa!

FEMALE VOICE: Fantastic!

(In another room, people begin singing a carol. Footsteps. Sound of a door opening.)

FEMALE VOICE: Laurie?

(child crying becomes audible)

FEMALE VOICE: Laurie, honey, what’s the matter?

CHILD: (crying) (unintelligible)

FEMALE VOICE: Oh honey, it’s okay...

CHILD: (sniffling) I hate Christmas!

(sound of static)
NEWT (VO): Dr. Gottlieb and I were sitting in his office, huddled around a sleek new monitor hooked up to a clunky old VHS player. He had just agreed to let me take a look at his black tapes, the “open” or “as-yet” unsolved paranormal cases in his archive.

We were watching a VHS tape, a home movie. It was a family Christmas celebration. It was crowded and homey, full of tinsel and crumpled paper and 80s sweaters. The tape was labeled simply “Hall.”

NEWT: So what are we seeing here?

DR. GOTTLIEB: Let me play it again. Keep an eye on the background.

NEWT (VO): Dr. G played the tape again. I watched closely.

DR. GOTTLIEB: Did you see it that time?

NEWT: Um...

(sound of tape rewinding)

(click as tape pauses)

DR. GOTTLIEB: Here.

NEWT (VO): We were looking at the shot towards the end, the moment when the woman filming opens the door. We could see the little girl—Laurie—sitting on the floor next to a bunch of wrapping paper, and the window and wall behind her.

DR. GOTTLIEB: Does anything look unusual to you?

NEWT: (...) 

DR. GOTTLIEB: By the window.

NEWT: Oh. The shadow?

DR. GOTTLIEB: Do you see a shadow?

NEWT: Isn’t it her mom’s shadow?

DR. GOTTLIEB: Think about the light source. It’s the sunlight coming from outside the window. It’s darker in the hallway, where the mother is standing with the camera. Her shadow wouldn’t fall that way. And anyway, the distance between the door and the wall is too far for such an oblique shadow.

NEWT: Huh...

NEWT (VO): He was right.

The longer I looked, the stranger the shadow became. It was hardly more than a wisp. Almost like smoke. But when I looked closer, I saw the gaps—on each side, like arms. A vertical slice in the middle, splitting the bottom half into legs.

And it was tall. It stretched from the floor almost to the ceiling.

It was freaky.
NEWT: That’s freaky.

DR. GOTTLIEB: Indeed.

NEWT: What is it?

DR. GOTTLIEB: Now that I’ve pointed it out, tell me what you see.

NEWT: Well it looks like a man. A really tall, thin man.

DR. GOTTLIEB: *(testing him)* Are you sure? Not a tree?

NEWT: Why would there be a tree shadow in a house?

DR. GOTTLIEB: Perhaps there’s another window. We don’t know the layout of other side of the room.

NEWT: No, it couldn’t be a tree. Look at the gap.

DR. GOTTLIEB: Which gap?

NEWT: This one. *(sound of fingernail tapping glass)* Legs.

DR. GOTTLIEB: *(no longer testing)* Don’t jump the gun, Mr. Geiszler. Describe what you are actually seeing.

NEWT: Fine, I see a gap. A gap that could be legs. Trees don’t have that.

DR. GOTTLIEB: Then what is it?

NEWT: You tell me.

*(click)*

*(sound of tape playing)*

NEWT (VO): Dr. Gottlieb pushed play on the tape and we watched the second half. The scene has changed. The resolution is sharper. We’re in a hall of some kind.

*(Recorded sound of a crowd, murmuring, echoing in a large space. Distant music is playing.)*

NEWT: Oh, this is a wedding.

DR. GOTTLIEB: Yes.

NEWT: Mazel tov.

*(Music gets louder. Organ music.)*

*(muffled, sounds of music and then someone making a speech continue in the background)*

NEWT (VO): It’s a wedding in a large, well-lit hall filled with flowers. The couple getting married are cute: the bride is in a dress, and the other bride is in a tux. They’re reading their vows when I spot it—this time, Dr. Gottlieb doesn’t have to point it out for me.
NEWT: Wait. Oh my god.

DR. GOTTLIEB: You see it.

NEWT: Yes... It’s the same shadow!

DR. GOTTLIEB: Is it?

NEWT: It’s so... My god. How high is that ceiling?

DR. GOTTLIEB: Probably fifteen feet.

NEWT: Fifteen? But its head is almost touching the ceiling...

NEWT (VO): Here’s what I saw. A shadow, again. It was on the wall, to the left behind the platform. It was impossibly tall this time, but on this higher-res recording, I could see it a lot clearer. I could see two legs, even a neck and head at the top. And at the ends of its long arms, I could see what looked like long, long fingers.

NEWT: Dude. What the [expletive bleeped].

DR. GOTTLIEB: This is the wedding of Lauren and Lucille Hall of Northampton, Massachusetts. They were married in 2006. The first film, which was taken in 1986...

NEWT: Laurie...

DR. GOTTLIEB: ...Short for Lauren.

NEWT: Same girl, twenty years later. Same person, same shadow.

DR. GOTTLIEB: So it would seem.

NEWT: Is there more?

DR. GOTTLIEB: These two videos are the only recorded proof we have.

NEWT: Recorded?

DR. GOTTLIEB: Yes. We have their testimony as well. They reported numerous sightings. The two first became friends as children, and grew up together. They claim they have been followed by this... figure since their childhood.

NEWT: You looked into this case, when?

DR. GOTTLIEB: Three years ago.

NEWT: And you couldn’t disprove it. The videos aren’t fake?

DR. GOTTLIEB: No, the videos haven’t been tampered with. Our forensics experts verified that. And the testimony of the two women—

NEWT: Both of them? Laurie's wife saw it too?

DR. GOTTLIEB: (strained) Yes. They were both... quite convinced.

NEWT: I’m sure most people are.
DR. GOTTLIEB: Most people who contact the Institute, yes. But I’ve rarely met anyone who wanted less to be convinced than Laurie Hall did.

NEWT: She wished she was wrong?

DR. GOTTLIEB: She very much wished both she and her wife were wrong.

NEWT (VO): Before we go on, I have to address something of a... broader journalistic nature. My producer Mako had become uncomfortable with the underhanded way I got access to his black tapes. She’s concerned that, by stretching the truth about my second visit, I manipulated Dr. G into giving me access.

MAKO: I think we should pause and examine this. We’re journalists, Newt. There’s an ethical code to what we do. And what sort of foundation are we building with our subject if we start in this way?

NEWT: Do you think I crossed a line?

MAKO: It sounds like you don’t think so.

NEWT: I don’t.

MAKO: I don’t, either. But making this show, you asked me to challenge you in matters of point of view. I’m challenging you on this one. You should think about it.

NEWT: (semi-convinced) Okay.

MAKO: If nothing else, it’s worth a conversation.

NEWT (VO): A conversation, we decided in the end, with Dr. G. But when I called and told him, he said he knew. He could tell. He just didn't care. He said I had nothing to apologize for.

So. It looked like my shenanigans hadn’t put our show in jeopardy. Not only that, but Dr. Gottlieb was receptive to what I proposed next.

NEWT: Well, we were wondering if you’d be willing to look more into the Hall case. The one you showed me.

DR. GOTTLIEB: ...I’m open to it, but I don’t believe Mrs. and Mrs. Hall feel the same.

NEWT: We got in touch. They are.

(interlude music #2)

(interior, cafe sounds)

WOMAN: (understated but steady, with a musical intonation that rises and falls) Hi. You must be Newt...

NEWT: Laurie?

LAURIE: Hi.

NEWT: Nice to meet you.
LAURIE: Nice to meet you too. Hi, Dr. Gottlieb.

DR. GOTTLIBE: Hello, Laurie. Good to see you.

(beat)

NEWT: Thanks for speaking with us. We really appreciate it.

LAURIE: Mhm.

NEWT (VO): After some diplomatic phone calling, we were able to meet with Laurie Hall. She agreed to speak with Dr. Gottlieb as well, after some hesitation. I was surprised he even wanted to come. But I got the feeling he was unsatisfied with how the case had ended a few years before—or rather, not ended.

We met with Laurie in a coffee shop near her home in the Hilltowns, east of the Berkshires. She’s thin but sturdy, with short, wispy red-blond hair under a buffalo plaid cap. She has callused farmers’ hands and a tired look in her eyes. Like... really tired.

LAURIE: Can you hear me alright?

NEWT: You’re good, Laurie.

LAURIE: (clears throat) Okay. I’m ready.

NEWT: Go ahead.

LAURIE: I actually used to love telling about this. It scared people. I thought it was funny.

NEWT: Used to?

LAURIE: Yeah. Not anymore.

I’ve seen him my whole life, ever since I was a kid. I don’t remember not seeing him. I always saw him out the corner of my eye. It never worried me. He never really moved, and he vanished every time I turned to look. He never left any sign of being real. I never thought to worry about him. It was just one of those things you accept when you’re a kid, those things you never think to ask, until later, when, duh.

It was like that as I grew up. Sometimes, a few weeks or even months would go by without a visit. Then, there he would be again, around a corner or standing in a doorway. He always came back. It didn't feel like spying, or checking in, or anything, really. I felt no intent. But then there were some periods of time where I would see him a lot. Multiple times a day.

Lucy and I met when we were kids. We were friends for years before we fell in love—when we got married, we’d been together for ten years already.

NEWT: Wow.

LAURIE: Yeah. But when we were growing up, I never mentioned this to her. Him. I never mentioned it to anyone, like I said. So it took me by complete surprise one day when she mentioned seeing “Mr. Tall Man” again. We were probably fifteen. I looked at her and said, “Who?”

“Oh, it’s just—” She laughed. “Sometimes I see this—this thing out the corner of my eye. It looks like a tall man, a shadow of one maybe, but like. Tall. I don’t know if I’m haunted or cursed or what. But I see him sometimes. I call him Mr. Tall Man. It’s okay, he never does anything...” I must have
looked freaked out, because she started reassuring me: “He never does anything, I don’t even know if he’s real—”

“But that’s impossible,” I said. “I see him too. I see him all the time.”

(interruption music #3)

LAURIE: Before I keep going, I just want to clarify something. This was not at the forefront of our lives. Not then. We were in high school, then college. He didn’t come as often in college—I didn’t see him at all for a few years, and Lucy only saw him once or twice. By that point, I thought it was all just coincidence and our imaginations.

NEWT: And no one else ever reported seeing him, besides you and Lucille?

LAURIE: That’s right.

NEWT: Did you ever both see him at the same time?

LAURIE: No. Not that I can remember.

We got engaged after college. We had been together since we were teenagers. We told the Tall Man story like a joke at parties. I hadn’t seen him in years.

It was when she got pregnant that things changed. We had been married a couple years by then. Something changed while she was pregnant... I don’t know what. She started talking about him again, and it wasn’t as a joke. She wasn’t seeing him... but she was thinking about him. I didn’t understand why.

She had Tessa. Life was good. At first. That’s how I knew it wasn’t postpartum depression—Tessa was more than ten months old when it started. The first night it... she... I still remember.

It was a hot summer night. Late July. We were watching TV on the couch. The baby monitor went off, and it was my turn. I got up and (shuddering sigh) I went to get Tessie. I picked her up, held her, rocked her. She went on crying, you know. I patted her back, thinking she was gassy, and I walked out into the hall.

She’s still crying. I’m rocking her, saying, (in gentle singsong) “Oh, let’s go see Mama, come on Tessie,” and I’m walking down the hall, down to the living room. I can see Lucy on the couch. She turns around, lifting her arms, starting to say, “Come here Tessie...” and then her face just... drops. Her eyes go wide and her mouth opens. But she doesn’t scream. She points.

She looked wild. (gasp) “It’s— it’s him—”

My arms tightened around the baby and I spun around. The hall behind me was dark, but there was a light at the end of it. A lighted doorway.

That was the thing—I didn’t see anything. The doorway was empty.

I spun back to Lucy—he was gone again, just like always, I thought—and the baby was crying, louder now—wailing. And Lucy was still pointing at it.

She could see it. It was still there.

And I couldn’t see it anymore.

“Lucy, what is it?” I said. She just shook her head. “There’s nothing there!” Then she looked at me
—or at the baby. I don’t know how she moved so fast, but in a second she had reached me and grabbed the baby and dashed outside.

NEWT: God. That must have been terrifying.

LAURIE: It was. I’ll never forget the look on her face when she saw... when she saw it.

It took a lot of talking her down to get her back inside the house. From that night on, her paranoia took off. She started burning incense, reading about hauntings, calling psychics and mediums and “ghost hunters.” She even called a priest—a priest? Lucy? She hadn’t set foot in a church since she was nine. It wasn’t like her at all.

I tried to be supportive at first. If it made her feel better, I would go along. But it wasn’t helping. She wasn’t seeing him, but she said she could feel him. That was worse, somehow. And it was even worse because I couldn’t see him anymore—I wasn’t really convinced any of it was real, and she could tell. It got bad enough to...

NEWT: To call the Gottlieb Institute?

LAURIE: ...Yes.

NEWT (VO): At this point, Laurie looked at Dr. Gottlieb. It occurred to me she had not really looked at or spoken to him the whole time we had been there. Now, she looked angry.

NEWT: Was there any particular incident that prompted your wife to call?

LAURIE: (flatly) I called.

NEWT: (surprised) You called?

LAURIE: (tensely) I called. We were outside, I forget why. We had run to the barn to check something. The light was on in Tess’s room as we walked back. And through the curtain, Lucy saw—said she saw—his silhouette. A silhouette.

NEWT: But you didn’t see anything?

LAURIE: No.

NEWT (VO): At this point, she glared pretty pointedly at Dr. Gottlieb.

LAURIE: No, I didn’t see anything. And that was what eventually led Dr. Gottlieb and his high-powered team to conclude that my wife was just hysterical.

DR. GOTTLIEB: (clearing throat) You yourself said...

LAURIE: (really truly pissed) Have you ever been married, Dr. Gottlieb?

DR. GOTTLIEB: (pauses) No.

LAURIE: That’s what I thought.

(silence)

NEWT: ...So if you—
LAURIE: You were supposed to help us. You didn’t do a thing. You satisfied yourself that it was all fake, all in her head, and then you left us out here where you found us.

(cafe sounds fade out, into interlude music #2)

NEWT (VO): We wrapped up the interview soon after. It was clear that Laurie was deeply upset by the effect of all this on her family. And she was upset with Dr. Gottlieb as well. When she had contacted his institute, she hadn’t been after the prize. He says she never even mentioned it. She had been after the debunk. The reassurance of scientific fact. He hadn’t been able to deliver it.

I called Laurie a few days later with some follow-up questions. Speaking to me from at home on her farm, she seemed more relaxed. I asked if her wife would be willing to share her side of the story. Laurie said it took some convincing, but she got Lucille to agree.

For her story, stay tuned. I’m Newt Geiszler. It’s the Black Tapes Podcast. We’ll be right back.

SPONSOR BREAK #1

(Sound of wind, trees, birds)

NEWT (VO): The Hall farm is up a long, winding hill road in Chester. Most of their business is eggs, but from the house we can see a big vegetable garden and a cute apple orchard. Lucille is small and sturdy like her wife. She has short hair and big blue eyes that keep you at a distance. She doesn’t look like a person who gets hysterical about imaginary threats; she looks like a person who’s weathered a lot of cold winters, and will weather a lot more.

Lucille showed me and my producer around the house.

(sounds of footsteps, doors opening)

NEWT: So you and Laurie moved in here after Dr. Gottlieb completed his investigation?

LUCILLE: That’s right. Laurie inherited the farm when her aunt died. Before, we were living in Huntington—caretakers on an old lady’s horse farm.

NEWT: So that was the house Dr. Gottlieb and his team investigated?

LUCILLE: Yes. He told us—or, told Laurie, I guess, I wasn’t listening very well at the time—that there was nothing to worry about. She believed him.

NEWT: You didn’t.

LUCILLE: (flatly) No.

NEWT: And you thought moving would help? A fresh start, all that jazz?

LUCILLE: I didn’t have a lot of hope, seeing as... it had been following us since we were kids. It was Laurie who thought a fresh start would be good.

NEWT: No such luck, I take it?
LUCILLE: No.

NEWT: Can you describe one of the incidents? If it’s not too upsetting.

LUCILLE: I won’t go into detail. I’ve seen it firsthand three times since we moved in here, three years ago. Once in the bathroom, once in the kitchen, and once in her bedroom.

NEWT: Whose bedroom, sorry?

LUCILLE: Tessa. My daughter, Tessa.

NEWT: Oh. Yes. Is—is it always with her?

LUCILLE: Yes. Always. It’s after her.

(beat)

LUCILLE: I want to show you something.

NEWT (VO): She took us upstairs and brought us into Tessa’s room. Tessa is five, so it’s got the usual stuff—stuffed horses, toy train track sets, lots of picture books. Lucille brought us to the back of the room and opened the closet door.

NEWT: What’s in here?

LUCILLE: Look.

(sound of wire hangers being pushed aside)

LUCILLE: There.

NEWT: Oh...

NEWT (VO): On the wall in the back of the closet, there was a big, black smudge. It looked like a smoke stain, or maybe an oil stain, the kind that you get on the garage floor after a long time. But—and maybe I know what Dr. G would say about this, but—there were two gaps in the smudge. Two spots missing. Like eyes.

NEWT: Did Tessa draw this?

LUCILLE: Mr. Geiszler, does that look like something a kid would draw?

NEWT: Well, a weird kid.

LUCILLE: (...)

NEWT: (hastily) Which your daughter isn’t. It could be mold, too.

LUCILLE: (darkly) It’s not mold.

NEWT (VO): Back downstairs, I asked Lucille if she had collected any other “evidence” over the past few years—since Dr. Gottlieb completed his investigation.

NEWT: We saw the Christmas tape and the wedding tape. Do you have any other photos or videos that we could maybe take a look at?

LUCILLE: No.
NEWT: Um... we can’t look?

LUCILLE: There's nothing to look at. We don’t have any photos.

NEWT: No photos? Wait, at all?

LUCILLE: No. We don’t take photos anymore.

NEWT (VO): Suddenly I realized. I looked around the living room, craned my neck to see into the hall—no. I hadn’t seen a single framed photo in the whole house.

NEWT: You don’t have... any photos? Of your daughter?

LUCILLE: No. I deleted, burned, erased everything.

NEWT: But why?

LUCILLE: It was in all of them.

(interlude music #1)

LUCILLE: We saw him when we were kids. I’m sure Laurie told you.

NEWT: Yes. But he—it didn’t worry you?

LUCILLE: Not then.

NEWT: And now?

LUCILLE: (takes a deep breath, exhales) It’s Tessa I worry about. It started when I was pregnant with her.

NEWT: You started seeing it again?

LUCILLE: No. No, it actually—it was actually my mother. In my third trimester, I went to visit my parents. They live up in Montreal now. It was the dead of winter. Right before my trip, one of her childhood friends died—a terrible plane accident. So when I got there, she was in kind of a despondent mood. She talked a lot about her childhood, especially late at night, after a few drinks.

One night, she told me this story. Two things you should know first, actually. One, my mother had a bad childhood. For a while, she and her sister were in a children’s home. And two, I had never talked to her about the Tall Man. Never mentioned it. Not once. Okay?

NEWT: Okay. I'm following you.

LUCILLE: She tells me this story. She and her sister were staying in this children’s home, some Catholic home outside of Boston. Nuns, rulers, cement. The dormitory where they slept was two long rows of beds with a central aisle, doors at either end. My mom was in one bed, and her sister was asleep across the aisle.

For some reason, one night, she couldn’t sleep. She was lying awake when she saw this—this man, she thought, come in the door. But he was... tall, she said. He had to duck to get through the doorway. He wasn’t a nun, and he sure wasn’t a priest. He was wearing a suit, it looked like. She couldn’t see his face in the dark.

He walked slowly down the aisle, looking at the sleeping girls. He got closer and closer, and she
sank lower and lower under her blanket. When he got to the foot of her bed, he stopped. Then he
turned away, and turned towards her sister. He walked up next to her bed. She was asleep, lying still.
He leaned over her, then bent, down, slowly, towards her. My mother was shaking.

Then he straightened up, walked away, and went out the other end of the dorm.

NEWT: Wow.

LUCILLE: Well, my mom wasn’t a stupid kid. The next morning, she thought it was probably a
dream. But at breakfast, her sister leaned over and said, “Did you see someone come into the
dormitory last night?” She had pretended to be asleep. But she’d seen him too.

NEWT: So they both saw him at the same time. And they saw him move. That’s different than
anything you and Laurie ever experienced, right?

LUCILLE: That’s right.

NEWT: Have you ever asked your aunt about this story?

LUCILLE: I can’t.

NEWT: Because it—

LUCILLE: Because she’s dead.

NEWT: Oh. I’m sorry. (...) When did she...?

LUCILLE: She died as a child. I never knew her. She went missing. It was a few years after this.
My mother couldn’t get the police to care, and they found her body a week after she disappeared.
She had drowned in a river.

NEWT: That’s horrible. I’m sorry.

(pause)

LUCILLE: (voice dropping, getting urgent) But you can see why this story upset me. What if it
came after my daughter? And it has. It’s following her. What if it leads her across the highway or off
the end of a dock the way it did to my aunt? Can’t you see?

NEWT: (trying to keep the conversation calm and on-track) Does your daughter see the same thing
you and your—and others have seen?

LUCILLE: (severely) No.

NEWT: Have you asked her?

LUCILLE: No. We don’t want to upset her, or put ideas into her head.

NEWT (VO): At this point, Lucille’s phone rang, and she had to go answer it. While I
was waiting in the living room, someone else came in.

NEWT: (voice pitching up) Hi there. You must be Tessa.

TESSA: (small voice, shy) Hi.

NEWT: I’m Newt. It’s nice to meet you.
TESSA: Nice to meet you.

NEWT: I met your kitten on the porch earlier. She’s very cute.

TESSA: Mhm.

NEWT: Did you name her?

TESSA: Was my mom mad at you?

NEWT: I hope not. Did you hear us talking?

(beat)

NEWT: I don’t think she’s mad. Sometimes when adults sound angry, they’re really just stressed out.

TESSA: (quiet) I think you were talking about [unintelligible].

NEWT: What’s that?

TESSA: Were you talking about my friend?

NEWT: ...What friend is that, Tessa?

TESSA: (...)

NEWT: Where is your friend? Does he have a name?

TESSA: (...)

NEWT: Tessa?

(…)

NEWT: (quietly) Is he in here?

TESSA: (also quiet) He’s in my closet.

NEWT: What’s his name?

TESSA: Why are you following him?

NEWT: Did he say I’m following him?

(beat)

TESSA: ...He says you don’t want to meet him.

(sound of footsteps)

NEWT: But—

LUCILLE: (to Tessa) Hi, honey. We have to get going. (To Newt) We have an appointment to get to. I’m sorry.

NEWT: No, that’s alright... Thanks very much for your time.
NEWT (VO): One problem with journalism—especially this kind, the investigative kind—is the never-ending chain of non-answers. Had I learned more from talking to Lucille? Yes. But like a hydra, what answers I had got just raised three more questions each. And now I was more curious than ever.

It’s the Black Tapes Podcast. I’m Newt Geiszler. Stay with us.

SPONSOR BREAK #2

NEWT (VO): If one thing stuck with me from the conversation with Lucille, it was the photos. What kind of parent has no pictures of their child? Or rather, what could be stronger than that biologically hardwired parental sentimentality? What kind of terrible scare?

I couldn't unravel the scare. But I could uncover a picture or two. With her parents’ permission, I called Tessa’s elementary school. The vice principal emailed me Tessa’s class picture from picture day last September. Twenty cute little kids, in two rows in front of a red curtain. And there she is, all gap teeth in the front row.

Her shadowy “friend”? Nowhere to be seen.

Maybe Lucille had been wrong. But I was still curious. Of course I was. So I asked the vice principal to put me in touch with the photographer.

(sound of phone ringing)

MAN’S VOICE: Hello?

NEWT: Hi, is this Nick?

NICK: Speaking! Are you the reporter?

NEWT: That’s me!

NEWT (VO): Nick Yau has worked for Hayward Photography for sixteen years. He’s taken a lot of class and individual portraits. But he helpfully agreed to dig up the photos from Tessa’s class.

NICK: Oh yes, I remember her class. Sweet kids.

NEWT: Yeah, she is, uh... she’s an interesting kid.

NICK: Tessa?

NEWT: Yeah. Did you find her picture? Her mother called ahead to give us clearance.

NICK: Yep. I’m sending it to you now.

NEWT: Ah. Just got it. Okay... Hmm.

NEWT (VO): It’s a charming portrait. Tessa is smiling, pretty naturally, which is rare for a five-year-old. I couldn’t help but think Laurie and Lucille should have a copy of it. It was a lovely photo of their daughter. And there was nothing wonky—I scanned the
curtain backdrop. No sign of her smudgy so-called “friend.”

NEWT: Huh.

NICK: What is it? Is something wrong?

NEWT: Something right, more like. I was checking if something was wrong. But it seems not to be.

NICK: Oh. I see. (sounding like he doesn’t) So why are you interested in these? Am I allowed to ask?

NEWT: Of course. My show is doing some research into the paranormal.


NEWT: (chuckles) Well it’s not actually NPR. It’s a podcast.

NICK: Oh.

NEWT: Tessa’s family has a sort of... ongoing case around it. Something with shadows showing up in photos, old home movies. Creepy [expletive bleeped]. We wanted to check if they showed up here, too. Guess not.

NICK: I took them out.

NEWT: What?

NICK: The shadows. I edited them out.

NEWT: (sounding very interested again) Which ones? Where? Sorry— which, which photos had shadows?

NICK: I believe it was... this one, Tessa Hall, and the class portrait as well. We do it all the time, retouching. I just photoshopped the flaws out.

NEWT: Do you still have the originals?

NICK: Probably, in my archive. I can check for you.

NEWT: Nick, I would love that.

NEWT (VO): Nick did check. I spent a long time examining the originals, and comparing them to the edited photos. He was right. There was a shadow.

Honestly, it wasn’t much. Just a vertical, slightly angled smudge against the red curtain. No arms, legs, or other sinister appendages. It was almost hard to see if you weren’t looking for it. Which, if you’re Nick Yau or Lucille Hall—or me—you are.

It was one thing in the individual photo. It could have been a curtain shadow. But in combination with the class photo? It was unsettling. It seemed awfully unlikely that it would show up in both. In the class photo, it was smaller, because the angle was wider. But with the wider angle, I could see that the shadow stopped abruptly towards the top of the curtain. It wasn’t a fold.

NEWT: So what do you think?
DR. GOTTLIEB: (over the phone) Think?

NEWT: Of the photos. The ones I sent you. You looked at them, right?

DR. GOTTLIEB: ...Yes.

NEWT: You don’t sound very impressed.

DR. GOTTLIEB: I looked at them. I saw what you were getting at, but frankly, they just look like shadows to me. Regular shadows. It’s a large curtain, with a lot of creases. There is nothing figurative about these shapes. The only reason you see a figure is that you are examining them in the context of this frightening story, this story of a shadowy figure.

NEWT: Pareidolia.

DR. GOTTLIEB: That’s right.

NEWT: (annoyed) So I’m seeing what I want to see.

DR. GOTTLIEB: Possibly.

NEWT: But what about your bias? You don’t want to see a shadowy figure, so you don’t.

DR. GOTTLIEB: That may be. What we would need in that case was a neutral observer, someone without prior bias. And I can think of just such a person. Did the photographer interpret these as figures?

NEWT: (flatly)...No. He didn’t. He thought they were lens errors.

DR. GOTTLIEB: (crisp) Well. If you had never spoken to Mrs. Hall, you would have interpreted these shadows the same way he did—as a shadow or lens aberration.

NEWT: Then, what? It’s all coincidence?

DR. GOTTLIEB: We cannot disregard the video evidence. I won’t pretend I can explain that. But the shadows in these photos are just as much the product of Lucille Hall’s paranoia as the rest of her stories. It’s simply been passed on to you.

NEWT: What about the smudge in the closet?

DR. GOTTLIEB: You yourself said it looked like the work of a child.

NEWT: (vehement) But Tessa says she didn’t do it.

DR. GOTTLIEB: And children never lie?

NEWT: I think you’re discounting any evidence you find inconvenient. I think you’re engaging in bad science.

DR. GOTTLIEB: What, exactly, do you know about the scientific method, Mr. Geiszler?

NEWT: Excuse me?

DR. GOTTLIEB: You are a journalist. And as a journalist I understand your mind must stay open. But there is such a thing as too open.
NEWT: (agitated laugh) Ha! My god! Dude, it is no wonder you’re so unpopular with your peers.

(beat)

NEWT: Hello?

(pause)

(interlude music #1 fades in)

NEWT (VO): He hung up on me. He’s not the first; surely he won’t be the last.

What I said was unprofessional. And rude. I wasn’t sure if I had just put the whole podcast in jeopardy. Maybe we would have to move on from paranormal investigators after all, on to our next unusual career—geocachers—the way we had originally planned, all those weeks ago.

(brief pause as interlude music #1 ends)

In the course of our research on the paranormal investigators we spoke to, my producer Mako had uncovered some personal information about Dr. Gottlieb. After some deliberation, we decided to include it in our show.

Earlier, when Laurie Hall asked Dr. Gottlieb accusatorially if he had been married, he said no.

Perhaps he thought the matter was too personal to discuss with Laurie—sure. But he was lying. Hermann Gottlieb was married. Legally, he still is. His wife went missing in 2002 under mysterious circumstances. She has not been seen for the last ten years.

I said it was his research that interested me, not his life. But the more I learned about Dr. Gottlieb, the more questions arose. It’s starting to seem that the two—his research and his life—are hard to separate. No one is on a mission like his for no reason. What might that reason be? Was it something in his past? Did it have anything to do with his wife? Would I ever find out, now?

NEWT (VO): A week after our last conversation, I came into work to find a voicemail from Dr. Gottlieb.

DR. GOTTLIEB: (muffled through phone) Hello, Mr. Geiszler. This is Hermann Gottlieb. I wanted to... apologize for our conversation last week. I was dismissive and improperly personal. I should not have hung up so abruptly.

Yesterday I got an interesting call. It pertains to a case you might be interested in—one of the ones you refer to as the “black tapes.” If you want to hear more, please give me a call.

(beat)

Take care.

NEWT (VO): I sure was interested.

—————— OFF THE RECORD ———————

MAKO: Are you really going to call him back? He was pretty rude.
NEWT: *(shifting in seat)* I know. I kind of liked it.

MAKO: *(bemused)* All right, Newt.


MAKO: Like, yes, sure. But is he more interesting than the other, *pleasanter* paranormal investigators we could be profiling?

NEWT: Honestly? Yeah.

*(pause)*

MAKO: So maybe a better question is, why is he calling *us* back?

______________ RESUME RECORD ______________

NEWT (VO): ...I called him back right away. Next time: our second case. And more on the story behind the story, the story of the missing Mrs. Gottlieb.

*(outro music begins)*

I’m Newt Geiszler. This is the Black Tapes Podcast.

See you next time.

*(music fades out)*
VOICEOVER: The Black Tapes is in part an exploration of belief and the search for truth, and in part a profile of the founder of the Gottlieb Institute, professional skeptic Dr. Hermann Gottlieb. Our story is progressing in order, week by week. So, if you’re a first-time listener, welcome to the show! Go start at episode one. Don’t worry. I’ll wait.

NEWT: From CTC Studios and the WGBH Podcast Network, welcome to the Black Tapes Podcast. I’m Newton Geiszler.

(Interlude music #1)

DR. GOTTLIEB: (voice message) Hello, Mr. Geiszler. It’s Hermann Gottlieb. I wanted to... apologize for our conversation last week. I was dismissive and improperly personal. I should not have hung up so abruptly.

Yesterday I got an interesting call. It pertains to a case you might be interested in—one of the ones you refer to as the “black tapes.” If you want to hear more, please give me a call.

NEWT (VO): When I got Dr. Gottlieb’s message, I called him back right away.

(sound of phone ringing)

(click)

DR. GOTTLIEB: Hello.

NEWT: Dr. Gottlieb, hi. It’s Newt Geiszler from the podcast.

DR. GOTTLIEB: Oh. Hello Mr. Geiszler.

NEWT (VO): Dr. G apologized, again, for hanging up on me. I told him it was all right.

NEWT: (brightly) ...and I’m very annoying. So in short, apology accepted. Water under the bridge.

DR. GOTTLIEB: Very well.

NEWT: And one other thing?

DR. GOTTLIEB: Yes?

NEWT: If this is going to be a working relationship, you’re gonna have to drop the “Mr.”

DR. GOTTLIEB: The?

NEWT: I’m saying you don’t have to be so formal. First-name basis is okay.

HERMANN: Very well, Newton.
NEWT: Um—well, not exactly what I—

NEWT (VO): Now, you might be wondering: why would he share this second case with us? Why offer an olive branch? My producer Mako had the same question.

NEWT: Maybe he feels bad for how the Hall case ended.

MAKO: Maybe. But that doesn’t seem like enough.

NEWT: Maybe he wants to promote his next book?

MAKO: (doubtful) Hmm.

NEWT: (doubtful) No, probably not.

MAKO: I’m glad we get to look into this new one. I am. But what does he get out of sharing more cases with us? I’d just feel more comfortable if we knew his motive.

(beat)

NEWT: What if I ask him?

NEWT (VO): So I did.

HERMANN: You’re wondering why I’m willing to be part of your program?

NEWT: Basically.

HERMANN: Ah. It’s simple. I wish to be the voice of reason. Our culture has stopped trusting science and has reverted to a subjective stance. Meanwhile, scientific literacy steadily worsens. So what are we left with? A culture where uninformed opinions dominate because the opinion is the sacred form of discourse in this country. This is where we get the anti-vax, flat earth, juice cleanse, “I married a ghost” headlines. It’s all sensation. Where is the accountability? Where are the skeptics?

NEWT (VO): (aside) He went on like this for a while.

HERMANN: (...) ...knew that you had spoken with people like Dr. Cantor, even Mark Grandi. I realized that if I did not call you back, you might look to one of them instead. And the idea of one of those ridiculous “experts” getting this platform to spout more of that nonsense to listeners, and to you? The idea was, frankly, torturing me. Since your first episode aired, we’ve seen a significant uptick in inquiries to the Institute. People are listening. I want nothing more than for that to continue. I believe you want the same thing.

NEWT: ...Mutually beneficial, you’re saying.

HERMANN: As long as you agree that it is.

NEWT: So I get to look into your black tape cases, and in exchange, you get a platform to “renew” skepticism.

HERMANN: Do you find that reasonable?

NEWT: I find it very reasonable. I like having the terms on the table. Most of my subjects don’t admit they want to get anything out of it. But you’re up-front about it. I like that.

(interlude music #2)
Hi. This is a message for Dr. Hermann Gottlieb. My name is Tomás Hawking. I’m the drummer and co-songwriter of a band called The Nephi. You’ve probably heard about us. We’ve been in the news lately. I heard you on Newt Geiszler’s podcast. I know this sounds strange, but I’d like to speak to you about a painting. You’ve probably heard of it... *Il Sorriso Capovolto.* I... I’d rather not say more over the phone.

*(interlude music fades out)*

NEWT: The Nephi. Short for Nephilim, if I remember my Boston indie band trivia right.

MAKO: That’s right.

NEWT: *(confidentially, to audience)* Mako’s a bit of a local music buff.

MAKO: Shh. The Nephi were an up-and-coming hardcore group from Allston. Their music was pretty average. They really made their name with some pretty outrageous, occult-themed stunts. The lead singer would do things like light fires, chant incantations, and even draw his own blood onstage.

People started coming for the show rather than the music. Some critics didn’t like the sensation over the music. And some good Boston Catholics didn’t like the Satan-gazing. Dan Penrose was quite a lightning-rod figure. He was controversial and chaotic, but charming. A few months ago he started dating a minor Kennedy, which got the Nephi some more mainstream attention.

NEWT: Guess not all good Boston Catholics hated him. *(laughs)*

MAKO: *(amused)* Yeah, they were a pretty bizarre couple.

NEWT: Yeah.

MAKO: That was, until Dan Penrose’s recent death.

NEWT: I remember. They found him in the woods, right?

MAKO: That’s right. It was last month. It was quite strange. Penrose was found tied to a tree, but only by one wrist. He could have untied himself pretty easily. His official cause of death was exposure. There was alcohol in his system, but nothing else, according to the report they released.

NEWT: I’m guessing some people saw this as kind of...

MAKO: More occult stuff? Yeah. They did. There was a lot of wild speculation.

NEWT: ...Like?

MAKO: *(sigh)* Well, some of his critics believed he got what he deserved for dabbling in the mystic and unholy.

NEWT: The religious critics?

MAKO: Yes, but also the occult critics. I heard people who said Penrose didn’t, quote, “know what he was messing with.”
NEWT: So some people believed he was really—what? Doing witchcraft?

MAKO: *(skeptical)* Apparently.

NEWT: *(intrigued)* Hmm.

MAKO: And then there were others who just believed he was a disturbed young man.

*(interlude music #2)*

NEWT (VO): I met with Dr. Gottlieb across the river, in his Cambridge office.

NEWT: So tell us about this painting. Why would Tomás Hawking have an interest in it?

HERMANN: I couldn’t tell you why a musician like Mr. Hawking would have an interest in this painting. But I can tell you about the painting itself.

NEWT: Please.

HERMANN: *Il Sorriso Capovolto* is a late work by the Renaissance painter Caravaggio. Its actual title is *Professore di Filosofia*, which means “Professor of Philosophy,” but *Il Sorriso Capovolto* is its popular nickname.

NEWT: And it means?

HERMANN: It means “The Upside-Down Smile.”

NEWT: Weird nickname. Can you describe the painting for our listeners?

HERMANN: It’s an oil painting of three men in a dark room. One man, older, wearing a sort of professorial robe, is gesticulating while another man, probably his student, looks on. There are a number of papers and books on the desk between them, dimly lit by candlelight. This is the main action of the painting. In the background of this office, or room, whatever it is, you can see a third man in profile, reading a book.

NEWT: Oh, I see.

*(sound of clicking)*

HERMANN: Look closer. Do you notice anything strange about the man in the background?

NEWT: His features are kind of blur... *(realizing)* Oh.

HERMANN: Yes.

NEWT (VO): It’s hard to make out at first, but the man in the background has an unusual face. There’s white at the top, below his forehead, which at a glance you might take for his eyes. But then you realize—it’s actually his teeth. His mouth is where his eyes should be, and his eyes are where his mouth should be.

NEWT: ...The Upside-Down Smile.

HERMANN: Exactly.

NEWT: *That’s* creepy as hell.
HERMANN: Many scholars agree. And collectors. This small painting is the subject of a popular myth called the Capovolto Curse.

NEWT: What a catchy name.

HERMANN: Quite.

NEWT: What are the stipulations of this curse?

HERMANN: It’s quite simple. Anyone who comes into possession of the painting dies within a year.

NEWT: How straightforward.

HERMANN: If you’re familiar with the so-called curse around the Hope Diamond, this one is of a similar nature. The Capovolto Curse is well-documented...

NEWT: (insinuatingly) Dr. Gottlieb, are you saying this myth is substantiated?

HERMANN: (crisply) Certainly not. Sensation formed the basis for this myth, and coincidence and a catchy name have done the rest.

In the early 1800s, it was acquired by a German duke who was assassinated a few months later. The painting was passed on to an obscure English nephew, who gambled it away, and died soon after of alcohol poisoning. Its whereabouts were unknown for a few years, and then it reappeared in the possession of a collector of curiosities. The sort of 1800s Englishman who went on big-game-hunting expeditions.

NEWT: I know the type.

HERMANN: Well, this collector hosted a dinner to celebrate the acquisition of this obscure Caravaggio. There was an incident in the kitchen and the house went up. All the attendees at the dinner were killed in the fire.

NEWT: Good god. How did the painting survive?

HERMANN: It got trapped under a stone wall and emerged relatively undamaged.

NEWT: Okay, Dr. G, this is pretty extreme. It’s one thing to call coincidence, but a whole house party killed in a fire? A party held in honor of this painting? And the painting survived? At a certain point, you’re ignoring the evidence.

HERMANN: At a certain point, but not this one. Every myth has to originate somewhere. Tragic house party in 1849 is the origin of the Capovolto Curse.

NEWT: (...) 

HERMANN: Correlation, or causation? That’s the root question at the heart of matters like these. In this case, causation has been attributed where it shouldn’t. (...) (sounding amused) You look dissatisfied with that answer.

NEWT: Dissatisfied? Me? What makes you think so?

HERMANN: (...) Well, the painting went into a trust for a few decades. It was in this period, following the tragic fire, that the curse rumor was born. The grandson who eventually inherited the collection had every reason to fan the flames; he was the one who traced it back to the duke and his
nephew, deepening the story. Then a few months later, he sold it off at an obscene price. You can almost always trace myths like these back to someone looking to turn a profit.

NEWT: Okay, Scooby Doo. Tell me this guy bit it.

HERMANN: Eventually.

NEWT: But within a year?

HERMANN: (...)

NEWT: Dr. G.

HERMANN: He died in the 1889 flu pandemic. Along with thousands of other people.

NEWT: (chastising) Dr. Gottlieb.

HERMANN: This is nothing but coincidence. It would have been statistically unlikely for him not to die in the pandemic. And I’m afraid the curse ends here. The next three documented owners all lived long, happy lives.

NEWT: How much do you know about this? Why is it a Black Tape?

HERMANN: It’s somewhat obscure, but it’s of local interest, and my former assistant, Justin, brought it to my attention. He was very interested in it... Obsessed, really.

NEWT: Local interest, you said?

HERMANN: That’s right. This painting doesn’t look familiar to you?

NEWT: No?

HERMANN: Its last owner was Isabella Stewart Gardner. She acquired it in 1910. It was stolen from her museum eighty years later.

NEWT: Oh my god. You’re joking. This is one of the paintings that got stolen in the Gardner Museum heist?

HERMANN: It is.

NEWT (VO): For our non-Bostonian listeners, or those who don’t know, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum theft is one of the great unsolved heists of the 20th century. Early on the morning of March 18th, 1990, two men dressed as police officers entered the museum, ostensibly on a disturbance call. They proceeded to tie up the guards and, over the next hour, steal thirteen pieces valued at a total of $500 million. They stole works by Rembrandt, Degas, Manet, Vermeer, and Caravaggio. It’s still the largest-value theft of private property in recorded history. And despite more than twenty years of investigative efforts, not one of those pieces has been recovered.

Because of the stipulations of Isabella Stewart Gardner’s trust, the frames still hang in the museum where the thieves left them. They sliced each painting out with a knife. In some, you can still see the jagged edges of the cut canvases.

NEWT: That’s insane. I must have stared at those empty frames in that museum a million times. This used to be in one of them.
HERMANN: It did.

NEWT: Well damn, now I know why the thieves were never caught. One of the paintings killed them!

HERMANN: (...)

NEWT (VO): I didn’t think it was possible for this case to get more interesting. A possibly-cursed, infamously-stolen Renaissance painting? With a creepy extra in the background? But believe it or not, it did.

After the break: we finally speak with drummer Tomás Hawking, and ask an art historian about the other myths of the *Sorriso Capovolto*.

I’m Newt Geiszler. It’s the Black Tapes. Stay tuned.

SPONSOR BREAK #1

MALE VOICE: Hi. You’re Newt Geiszler?

NEWT: That’s me! I hear you’re a fan.

MALE VOICE: I love your show. You’re shorter than I expected.

NEWT: (brightly) I get that a lot. Ready?

NEWT (VO): I sat down with Tomás Hawking at his studio in Cambridge.

NEWT: So. How did you first hear about this painting?

HAWKING: I heard about it from a fan, actually. Dan and I co-write... co-wrote, I mean—we wrote the songs together. As time went on, he got more into the performance aspects of it. The flashy stuff. I stayed more focused on the lyrics.

His performance stuff, though, started attracting a different type of fan. A more... intense type of fan. They were really into his, like... (trails off)

NEWT: ...spooky sensibilities?

HAWKING: ...I don’t like to label people, but, yeah. They seemed satanic. Witchy. They creeped me out a little bit. Sometimes they would talk to me after a show, if they knew I was the writer. They would tell me how deep my lyrics were, how they saw these connections—things I had never meant to put in there. Mythical stuff. *Biblical* stuff. One guy told me the BPM was the inverse square of the Pythagorean comma. I still have no idea what that means.

NEWT: And you heard about the painting from one of these fans?

HAWKING: That’s right. One dude pulled me aside and told me to look it up. He said the text on it would “interest” me.

NEWT: And you looked?

HAWKING: I found online that *Il Sorriso Capovolto* was one of the missing ones from the Isabella Stewart Gardner. So I looked at the text on a high-res scan.
NEWT: Sorry—what text?

HAWKING: On the book. You’ve seen the painting, right?

NEWT: I’ve seen the reproduction.

HAWKING: The professor has a bunch of papers and books on his desk. One of them is open and it has a bunch of words on it—a code. The whole myth about the painting is around that code.

NEWT: Hm. That’s not the myth I heard about.

HAWKING: Well there’s the curse where the owner dies within a year. There’s also this code. I read more about it on some, you know, wacko deep web forums. People are crazy about this code. No one’s cracked it.

I thought it was pretty interesting, and that I might actually write a song about it. I sent the links to Dan so he could check it out too.

NEWT: And was he interested?

HAWKING: Way too interested. He got way more into it than me. It was all he talked about for the next few weeks. He started corresponding with some of these nutbags, I think. Then he started cancelling practice. Then the next thing I know, he’s dating that b—

NEWT: (quickly) Ainsley Kennedy-Brooks?

HAWKING: ...Yeah. Her. They had met before, but they started dating after he got into this whole painting thing. A few weeks went by. I didn’t see him at all. Barely a word. Then, one night, he shows up at my house. It’s like 3 AM. He’s drunk out of his mind, and maybe high, and he’s talking about this painting. He says he saw it, and now he’s going to die. I didn’t know what the hell he was talking about.

NEWT: Well see, there’s this curse—

HAWKING: I know there’s a curse. What, you think I don’t know about the curse? No, I know. I didn’t get what he meant. The painting is missing, Dan, I said. I know, he says, but I found it.

NEWT: He saw the real one? The actual Sorriso Capovolto?

HAWKING: Yeah. Two weeks later, they found him dead in the woods. Tell me that’s not the curse.

NEWT: Damn.

HAWKING: Yeah.

NEWT: So did he say where or how he saw this painting?

HAWKING: He did, sort of. He was pretty incoherent. But it sounded like it was a friend of a friend of someone Ainsley knew. I asked him when he woke up the next morning, but he wouldn’t talk about it. Now I’ll never know.

NEWT: (hesitantly, thinking aloud) ...Do you think there’s any chance that he... started dating her, in order to get to this painting?

HAWKING: ...What?
NEWT: You said they knew each other before. They started dating after he became obsessed with the painting. Maybe he knew she had connections in the black market art trade.

HAWKING: *(doubtful)* I don’t know, man. Have you seen that girl? A little too Vineyard Vines to patronize the black market.

NEWT: Don’t underestimate the money, Tomás. Never underestimate the doors it opens. Even—especially—the unsavory ones.

HAWKING: *(unconvinced)* I guess.

NEWT: So. It’s your opinion that this painting was what killed your friend?

HAWKING: Whoa, dude. Way to change tracks.

NEWT: Sorry. Too abrupt?

HAWKING: A bit. (...) I mean, doesn’t it make sense?

NEWT: Honestly, no. The curse is that the owner dies within a year.

HAWKING: *(defensive)* And?

NEWT: Well... unless Penrose bought the painting...

HAWKING: No other explanation makes sense.

NEWT: Do you think he bought it?

HAWKING: I never saw it, if that’s what you’re asking me.

NEWT: What kind of cursed painting kills someone by tying them to a tree?

HAWKING: *(harshly)* It could have been those people. The people he was corresponding with. The cultists.

NEWT: You think they could have killed him? What makes you think so?

HAWKING: *(angrily)* Maybe. I don’t know.

NEWT: Do you know any of their names? Contact info?

HAWKING: No.

NEWT: ...What about Ainsley Kennedy-Brooks? Do you know how we might get in touch with her?

HAWKING: No. Sorry.

*(interlude music #2)*

NEWT (VO): We go in touch with Ms. Kennedy-Brooks’s publicist, but they declined our request for an interview. Requests. We are still digging into possible black market connections to the missing painting. Seeing as the BPD, FBI, and ISG Museum have been searching for this thing for twenty-four years, Mako is not optimistic. But I am.

Meanwhile, I sat down with Dr. Qian Shao, a historian who works at the Museum of
Fine Arts and teaches art history at the museum school. I wanted to ask them about the earlier history of the painting, as well as the mysterious “code” Tomás Hawking referred to.

DR. SHAO: Hi, you must be Mr. Geiszler.

NEWT: Wow. You’re the art history professor? The MFA lets people wearing snapbacks be professors?

DR. SHAO: And NPR lets Rivers Cuomo impersonators be reporters? I learn something new every day.

NEWT: (laughs) Ha! Good god, you got me.

DR. SHAO: I did. So you wanted to know about Caravaggio? _Il Sorriso Capovolto_, is that right?

NEWT: (still recovering) Please.

DR. SHAO: Caravaggio was an interesting dude. His paintings depict these theatrical, almost Hollywood-esque moments, of terror, torture, pain, or conversion. The _extreme_ moments of human experience. Yes, they’re usually Biblical scenes. But in this era people were getting interested in the human side of the biblical, and like all good Renaissance painters, he was good at finding it.

Caravaggio was a dramatic bitch outside of work too. Apparently he was ready to brawl at any time. He was so touchy and violent, in fact, that he was tried for murder and sentenced to death in Rome. He fled to Naples, where he made his career as a painter. Later he was in another fight and his face was disfigured. He died soon after, under pretty mysterious circumstances.

NEWT: Damn. What can you tell us about his relationship to this painting?

DR. SHAO: Most historians agree he painted this in the last year of his life. The same year as his disfigurement.

NEWT: Do we know who the people in the painting are?

DR. SHAO: No. In all likelihood, they were models.

NEWT: What about the curse? Did that start in the 1800s?

DR. SHAO: This painting actually has an occult cachet that goes way back, back before the Duke of Hanover’s great-nephew started telling tales. It actually goes back to when Caravaggio painted it in 1609. People have been seeing something satanic in this painting pretty much since day one. They point to the deformed face—the symbols on the book—see, there here?—and this text on the paper.

NEWT: I’m told that’s a code.

DR. SHAO: It sure is.

NEWT: Unbreakable?

DR. SHAO: So far. Though there’s been lots of speculation. There have been some theories—some people who thought they cracked it. But nothing reputable. Other people believe it’s just nonsense.

NEWT: What do you think?

DR. SHAO: Caravaggio isn’t my particular specialty. But I know enough about him to doubt that he
would just throw some gibberish on there.

NEWT: So what do you think it says?

DR. SHAO: ...I wouldn’t begin to speculate.

NEWT: ...I’m hearing a “but…”

DR. SHAO: But, others have. I’ve read some interesting fringe theories.

NEWT: Please share, Dr. Shao.

DR. SHAO: There’s a common speculation that, when translated, this text is an incantation to open a portal. Not the Aperture Science kind.

NEWT: Dude. What kind?

DR. SHAO: A portal to hell.

NEWT: (genuinely surprised) Oh my!

DR. SHAO: Yeah. A portal to hell of the biblical variety.

NEWT: Now, I went to Hebrew school, not Sunday School. But I don’t think they taught portals to hell in Sunday School either.

DR. SHAO: (chuckles) No. But you might be surprised how common this is in the history of Christianity. Satanists, rebellious monks, curious peasants. People have been trying to commune with hell for centuries.

NEWT: (still sounding incredulous) People including Caravaggio?

DR. SHAO: Allegedly. It’s impossible to say if he was a member of one of these groups, or if he just came across the text and thought it was interesting. Ever since he first painted it, this code been accumulating rumors like a snowball rolling downhill. Rumors of it being a code from the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, from the Freemasons, the cult of Pythagoras.

It’s hard to say where the rumors started, because they’ve been in the literature since basically 1610. And the most common theory is that, whatever cult or group or gang Caravaggio got or stole or borrowed this code from, they came calling.

NEWT: ...They killed him? Over this knowledge?

DR. SHAO: Like I said, he died under mysterious circumstances. But he had a lot of enemies. We’ll never know which one got to him first.

NEWT: (after a thoughtful pause) You say everyone is clamoring to decode this.

DR. SHAO: That’s right.

NEWT: If he really stole this incantation from an existing group—presumably from a longer text—wouldn’t that exist somewhere else in the world?

DR. SHAO: If it does, no one has found it yet.

NEWT: Then isn’t it possible this was an original creation?
NEWT (VO): Dr. Shao’s background definitely added a new layer. A direct line with demons? What would make Caravaggio interested in such a thing? I mean, Do I sympathize? Am I interested? Sure, I mean, aren’t we all? Interested? In demons?

And did he plagiarize this supposed portal incantation from some cult, or was he perhaps a member of such a cult? Or did he invent it himself? Was he killed for it? And if so, was he killed for heresy, or because someone else was willing to kill to get it?

HERMANN: These aren’t the kind of questions historians are really equipped to answer. Not without a time machine.

NEWT: I know. But still!

HERMANN: Still?

NEWT: It’s still fascinating.

HERMANN: It’s certainly interesting. But without evidence, it’s pure speculation.

NEWT: You’re no fun.

HERMANN: I can tell you some of the mythology about portals to hell. That was, I believe, your original reason for this meeting.

NEWT: Was it?

HERMANN: I’ve heard about this putative decode your art historian referred to. It comes with a compelling story. I believe it was my intern Justin who told me about it.

NEWT: And this code is some sort of portal?

HERMANN: People have been looking for this incantation for centuries. It cannot open a portal on its own—it is an incantation to invoke a demon with that capability.

NEWT: (interested) A demon?

HERMANN: An archdemon, actually. There is also a supporting myth from one of the Gnostic Gospels rejected by the church. In fact there are actually two oblique references to a demon with similar capabilities in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

NEWT: What do they say?

HERMANN: As you might recall, Lucifer led a revolt against God.

NEWT: I recall.

HERMANN: God banished Lucifer to hell. But on his way out of heaven, Lucifer, now referred to as Satan, created some sort of a back door. This portal would allow Satan and his minions back into the earthly realm without God knowing.
NEWT: And it can be opened by this archdemon, provided we call him up with the correct incantation?

HERMANN: *(back to skeptic voice)* Certainly. If any of this were real.

NEWT: Oh, certainly.

HERMANN: Besides the fact that this incantation is a myth, and a myth mostly based on non-canonical texts, reading the Caravaggio code as this incantation is nothing more than wishful thinking. No one knows what the incantation sounds like, and additionally, there are several glaring issues with the decoders’ methodology.

NEWT: Hmm.

HERMANN: *(pauses)* May I ask you something, Mr. Ge—Newton?

NEWT: Shoot.

HERMANN: Why are you so interested in these black tapes?

NEWT: (...) Intellectual curiosity, I guess?

HERMANN: You don’t sound very certain.

NEWT: Well I could ask you the same question, Dr. Gottlieb. Why devote your life to this?

HERMANN: *(agreeing)* I suppose it is difficult to sum up.

*(beat)*

HERMANN: You think your reasons, then, must be similar to mine.

NEWT: I would never *dream* of presuming such a thing.

HERMANN: *(chuckles)*

NEWT: But it won’t stop me from trying to figure those reasons out. Hermann, can I play you something?

HERMANN: What sort of something?

NEWT: It’s something we recorded for the last episode. About you. I wanted to get your permission to air it.

HERMANN: ...All right.

*(clip from Episode 2 plays)*

*NEWT (VO): Earlier, when Laurie Hall asked Dr. Gottlieb accusatorially if he had been married, he said no. Perhaps he thought the matter was too personal to discuss with Laurie—sure. But he was lying. Hermann Gottlieb was married. Legally, he still is. His wife went missing in 2004 under mysterious circumstances. She has not been seen for the last ten years.*

HERMANN: ...You’re investigating me?
NEWT: Nominally. This came up when we were doing background checks on all our paranormal investigators. I’m afraid to say you had the most interesting backstory of any of them.

HERMANN: (...)

NEWT: Again, I’m not going to air any of this without your permission. So you can tell me, honestly: what do you think?

HERMANN: About the personal angle?

NEWT: You don’t sound into it.

HERMANN: So your interest in these cases isn’t purely intellectual curiosity. It’s also personal curiosity about me.

NEWT: It wasn’t, at first. But the more I learned, the more it seemed your work and your life were... interconnected.

HERMANN: That’s true of anyone. It’s true of you, I’m sure.

NEWT: Sure. Of course. But the connection is, in your case, if you’ll excuse me, fascinating.

(beat)

HERMANN: What do you want to know?

NEWT: You don’t mind?

HERMANN: I can’t promise I’ll answer everything.

NEWT: Fair. Do you mind talking about what happened with your wife?

HERMANN: No at all. There isn’t very much to tell. We were driving up the coast to Acadia. We stopped for gas. I went inside to pay. When I came back outside, she was gone.

NEWT: That must have been terrifying.

HERMANN: It was.

NEWT (VO): So Dr. Gottlieb was willing to talk about his personal life, to an extent. This was good news. But he left some details out. For example, the fact that he was the prime suspect for a long time, and the fact that his wife’s parents went on record saying they held him responsible.

Now, we know that the husband is always the prime suspect. And with good reason. Domestic violence is responsible for more than half the killings of women in the US. But in the case of Vanessa Gottlieb, the police ruled her husband out and switched their focus to a serial killer working in the area at that time. As for the parents, same thing. Parents are generally unlikely to trust their daughter’s chosen partner. Again, perhaps not without reason.

We reached out to Vanessa’s parents, and they agreed to speak with us. We’ll have that interview next week.

Meanwhile, Dr. Gottlieb and I visited the home of the Penrose family.
WOMAN: Hi. Are you the reporters?

NEWT: Well, I am. This is Dr. Gottlieb. He works in Cambridge.

WOMAN: I’m Nell. Good to meet you both. Please come in.

NEWT (VO): Dan Penrose still lived in his family home in Dorchester when he died. His mother, Nell, told us he liked living in the house where he grew up. She was gracious, but still in deep mourning.

(sound of door opening)

MRS. PENROSE: This is the garage. Dan and the boys practiced a lot in here.

NEWT: Did you like their music?

MRS. PENROSE: I didn’t listen much, to be honest. It’s not really my kind of music. I was just glad they were making a living doing what they loved.

NEWT: Of course. Not many people get that opportunity.

MRS. PENROSE: You know, I was standing here when I got the phone call.

NEWT: I’m sorry. That must have been horrible.

MRS. PENROSE: Yes. (...) Excuse me.

(click of door closing)

NEWT: So this was his studio.

HERMANN: I assume the police already went over everything interesting.

NEWT: Don’t assume so fast. What’s this?

HERMANN: His laptop?

NEWT: Shouldn’t the police have taken this?

HERMANN: Probably. Maybe he only used it for music. Are you—

(sound of typing)

NEWT: Yes?

HERMANN: Newton.

NEWT: I just want to see what he was making. Look. This was open in Garage Band.

/discordant music begins playing/

HERMANN: (tsk sound) The noises people consider music in this day and age, I honestly cannot fathom.

NEWT: Come on, take it easy. It’s an unfinished work!

HERMANN: If you say so.
(sound of boxes being shifted)

NEWT: I bet a lot of people would be interested in hearing this. I wonder if Tomás has a copy.

HERMANN: ...Newton?

NEWT: Mhm?

HERMANN: (...)

NEWT: What is that? A tube?

HERMANN: It's a carrying case.

NEWT: For?

HERMANN: For canvas. It's used to transport rolled-up paintings.

NEWT: (...)

HERMANN: Now—

NEWT: Holy [expletive bleeped].

HERMANN: Now, wait. It’s empty. If you came to steal a painting from the dead, would you take it out of the tube, leaving evidence it was here? Or would you simply steal the tube?

NEWT: Well, probably, but not necessarily. Maybe his purchase of the tube could be traced back to him—like, through credit card statements—and the thief didn’t want to leave a hole—

HERMANN: That’s a bit of a stretch, Newton.

NEWT: Maybe he bought the tube in preparation to buy the painting, and died before the transaction was completed.

HERMANN: Or maybe this tube was used for something completely different. Carrying musical equipment.

NEWT: (unconvinced) Maybe. Let me take a picture of it. We’ll get in touch with the police and share our suspicions.

HERMANN: (also unconvinced) You really think he was mixed up in a black market art deal?

NEWT: I’m not sure I think that’s why he died, but it seems like a possibility. How do you think he died?

HERMANN: The police said there was alcohol in his system. He was being treated for bipolar disorder. He was probably in the midst of a manic episode when he tied himself to that tree. Dan Penrose is not the first nor the last musician to fall prey to his own mind.

NEWT: So it’s that simple?

HERMANN: Occam’s razor, Newton. It could be black market art dealers, it could be apocalypse cultists. Or it could be the last episode in a series of many in a difficult life.

NEWT (VO): Occam’s razor, huh. The young musician is troubled, not the latest victim
in a two-hundred-plus-year-old curse? A curse that began with a trumped-up story about a housefire, a drunk, and an unlucky collector? Sure. But that’s the origin of the myth, not proof. And it’s just coincidence that so many others have died.

What about Justin, the intern who was into this cult painting way before it was cool? Before the Nephi? What Dr. Gottlieb didn’t mention—what he may, in fact, not know—is that Justin McCall died six months after leaving the Gottlieb Institute. His car flipped over on I-95 in an ice storm. He was killed instantly.

What makes some things different? What imbues them with this power, this power to captivate us, ensnare us? What makes people give their lives away to these stories? Will we ever understand?

(outro music begins)

Next time: a famous haunted house, an infamous exorcism. Plus, we delve more into the disappearance of Vanessa Gottlieb. I’m Newt Geiszler. It’s the Black Tapes Podcast.

See you next time.
VOICEOVER: The Black Tapes is in part an exploration of belief and the search for truth, and in part a profile of the founder of the Gottlieb Institute, professional skeptic Dr. Hermann Gottlieb. Our story is progressing in order, week by week. So, if you’re a first-time listener, welcome to the show! Go start at episode one. Don’t worry. I’ll wait.

(Familiar theme music fades in)

From CTC Studios and the WGBH Podcast Network, welcome to the Black Tapes Podcast. I’m Newt Geiszler.

(Theme music plays: acoustic guitar, church bells, a faraway female voice.)

NEWT: Welcome to episode four. The response we’ve gotten to our first few episodes has been fabulous. Please keep the messages, emails, voicemails, and tweets coming. We love it. And so do our producers at GBH. Remember where funding comes from, kids.

Among the queries, cheers, criticism, and love letters to Dr. Gottlieb, we’ve gotten a lot about the death of Dan Penrose and his missing painting, *Il Sorriso Capovolto*. We’re continuing our investigation. We’ll update you as soon as we have anything.

Our other search, for the missing Vanessa Gottlieb, has a bit more traction. Among our listener messages about her, we’ve gotten a few tips. We’re looking into those. We’re even looking into hiring a PI to investigate further. In the meantime, we spoke to her parents about her disappearance, and we’ll have that interview later in this episode.

NEWT (VO): This week, we’re taking a little trip south to the town of Coventry, Rhode Island.

(sound of engine from inside a car, other cars passing on the highway.)

NEWT: So, tell me about this case. What’s in Coventry?

HERMANN: *(clears throat)* The Festival of Paine.

NEWT: Uh—come again?

HERMANN: Festival of Paine—that’s Paine with an *e*. So named for the haunted house it celebrates.

NEWT: *(teasing)* Allegedly haunted house.

HERMANN: Of course—pardon me. The famously, *allegedly* haunted Paine House. The house’s compelling mythology stems from a famous exorcism that took place there in 1935. The exorcism of Zilpha Foster.

NEWT: Hey, I’ve heard of that. That was one of the cases that *The Exorcist* was based on.
HERMANN: *impressed* Yes, it was.

NEWT: *cocky* I know my horror movies.

HERMANN: How unsurprising.

NEWT: *laughs* Tell me about this festival.

HERMANN: Well, every September, on the threshold of autumn, Coventry jumpstarts Halloween fever by throwing this festival. The locals set up a number of haunted houses, give haunted hay rides, and hold a large, costumed scavenger hunt. It’s quite the tourist attraction.

NEWT: Sounds like a pretty good time. I’m sure that’s not why you want to go.

HERMANN: There is something of a mystery surrounding this historical exorcism. There is a murder associated with it. Zilpha had been exhibiting troubling behaviors for some time, and when they finally called in the exorcist, he was unable to *dubiously* “get” the “demon” “out.” Apparently, it was too powerful. Shortly after the failed exorcism, a girl named Jane Cromwell Mather, who knew Miss Foster, was found dead. Quite brutally murdered. Her neck had been twisted all the way round. Zilpha was blamed for this murder, and she was institutionalized.

NEWT: Yeesh. No other suspects?

HERMANN: Apparently not. That’s one question I have for the local historian. The consequence, however, is that the Coventry Paine Festival is known for its... distinctive costume gimmick.

NEWT: *pause* ...No.

HERMANN: Yes, I’m afraid. Festival-goers wear their costumes backwards, so that their head appears twisted round 180°.

NEWT: Dude. That is dark.

HERMANN: Quite.

NEWT: What kind of town turns a murder into a festival?

HERMANN: The festival is actually a fairly recent tradition. It was started in the ‘80s. Since then, the Zilpha Foster myth has expanded from a dark chapter in smalltown history to a depersonalized, money-making ghost story. Ghost sightings are reported every year. I get calls every September. So I’m interested in the town narrative surrounding this myth.

NEWT: You want to know who’s making the money.

HERMANN: That’s right.

NEWT: Well I’m interested in these ghost sightings. You said people see... Zilpha? The murder victim?

HERMANN: The murder victim, Jane Cromwell Mather. They say they see a ghost, wearing a nightgown, with her head on backwards.

NEWT: *intrigued* Freaky.

HERMANN: *crisp* Absurd.
NEWT: (humoring him) Of course, it’s probably just other festival-goers in costume.

HERMANN: As you say. That is most likely.

NEWT: And I always say the most likely explanation is the simplest.

HERMANN: (chuckles)

NEWT: So, this isn’t a black tape, then? Just a regular case?

HERMANN: No, just a regular case. Unless we find something surprising today.

NEWT: I’ll take that as a challenge.

HERMANN: If you insist.

NEWT (VO): Dr. Gottlieb wasn’t lying about the popularity of the festival. The little town was packed. We crossed the covered bridge into town, wound through the oak and maple forest full of Audubon trails, the trees not quite starting to turn for fall. The closer to the town center we got, the more signs we saw. It seemed like every street had a haunted house on it. Bands of costumed visitors floated like ghosts up and down the streets. They were all very enthusiastic. And sure enough, their costumes were on backwards. It was like walking into a weird college costume party about which I had not gotten the memo.

(street sounds)

NEWT: Hey—excuse me?

WOMAN #1: Yes?

NEWT: Are you visiting for the festival?

WOMAN #1: No, I’m from here. But I come out every year. It’s fun.

NEWT: And what do you think of the ghost of Jane Cromwell Mather? Real?

WOMAN #1: Oh, definitely real. I’ve seen her!

NEWT: You have?

WOMAN #1: Oh, yeah. Twice. Once while I was driving. It was [expletive bleeped] terrifying.

(separate clip)

WOMAN #2: The backwards-facing ghost is totally real! I came all the way from Pennsylvania to see her. Like my costume?

(separate clip)

MAN #1: Oh, nah. The festival is just an excuse to get [expletive bleeped] up.

(separate clip)

MAN #2: No, I don’t believe in all that gar—oh my god, she’s behind you!

(separate clip)
MAN #3: I know she’s real. I saw her myself.

NEWT: Yeah?

MAN #3: Yeah. So I was asleep one night.

NEWT: Happens to the best of us.

MAN #3: And then I just, like, wake up. For no reason. No sound or anything. I must have sensed something... I got up, and looked out my window. There she was. Standing in my yard. I swear my heart stopped. Her back was to me... and then she turned... but only her head... it turned all the way around and she looked right at me. I almost [expletive bleeped] my pants dude.

NEWT (VO): I was actually surprised how widespread witness claims were. Almost half the people we spoke to said they had seen the backwards-facing ghost before.

I caught up with Dr. Gottlieb at the Coventry Library. He was getting a history lesson from the archivist there, Alanna Guth.

GUTH: (older woman, a bit cranky-sounding) You’re right about the festival distorting the story. The version you may have read online or heard (disdainfully) out there, those versions get a lot of it wrong. It’s like a game of telephone. I brought out the newspapers from ‘35 for Dr. Gottlieb here. You can take a look too.

NEWT: Thank you. Do you mind if we make some copies?

GUTH: These originals are delicate. I have copies. I’ll print them for you.

NEWT: Thanks.

HERMANN: I’d appreciate copies as well.

GUTH: Certainly.

(intercut music #2)

GUTH: As you can see here, the papers didn’t talk about much else for a while after. Nor did the townspeople.

NEWT: I can imagine. A town this small...

GUTH: It shook everyone up. I wasn’t born yet, but my mama was a young lady. She used to tell me all about it. Such a fear over the whole town.

NEWT: Did she know Zilpha Foster, or Jane Mather?

GUTH: She knew Jane from church. They weren’t friends by any stretch, but in a town so small, it was hard not to know each other.

NEWT: And Zilpha?

GUTH: I don’t think you couldn’t rightly say anyone really knew Zilpha. She kept to herself. Mama said she was always a little strange.

NEWT: How did Zilpha and Jane know each other?
GUTH: They were neighbors. Their families lived next door to each other. The way my mother told it, they didn’t know each other well. Like I said, Zilpha kept to herself. And that father of hers was a piece of work. He kept her shut in as best he could. What he didn’t do to alienate her from the rest of the town, she did herself.

Mr. Foster was a church man. I’m a Catholic myself, but he was, you know. A Catholic. No one knows what strange behavior of Zilpha’s set him off, but somehow he got the idea in his head that his daughter was possessed.

NEWT: So you don’t believe she was really possessed?

GUTH: Mr. Geiszler, it was 1935. Whatever she had, they had no way of diagnosing it, never mind treating it. My mother thought she had hystericis. I think it could have been manic depression, even schizophrenia. Or it could have been something as simple as an anxious disposition. Hell, it could have been her monthlies. Any out-of-the-ordinary female behavior would have set off alarm bells in that father’s head.

Regardless of the trigger, next thing we know, he’s threatening his daughter that he’ll call the priest. He locked her in her bedroom—this we know from the Mathers next door. They heard all the commotion. Zilpha lived on the top floor. Next thing they know she’s climbing out the bedroom window, holding a sheet like she’s about to jump.

NEWT: The neighbors saw this?

GUTH: Yes. And it was Jane who ran next door to tell Mr. Foster what his daughter was doing. He busted open the bedroom door and yanked Zilpha back in.

They say she was incoherent from that point onward. That was when he called the priest. We have several accounts of the exorcism: from the priest, his assistant, and the housemaid. They say it took all three of them plus Mr. Foster to hold her down.

Father McEwan said later that he never saw anything like it, not before then and not after. He said she was so strong she lifted the housemaid and her own father with one arm and threw them off. He said the demon possessing her was so powerful he did not have the holy words to cast it out. He called it the Griogori. They were in there all night. When the dawn broke, she was the same as ever.

NEWT: God.

GUTH: I’m afraid He had nothing to do with what happened next. Father McEwan told them he needed some air. They kept Zilpha tied to a chair in the parlor. Father McEwan went for a walk down the road. He walked out of the Fosters’ house, past the Mathers’ house. He was gone about fifteen minutes. In that time, there was a brief window where Zilpha was left unsupervised. As he walked back, he passed the Mathers’ house again. A terrible scream came from the back garden.

Father McEwan opened the gate and dashed around behind the house. Mrs. Mather was on her knees in the grass, screaming. He saw what she saw then: her daughter Jane, motionless, arms all tangled in the clothesline, outstretched like she was about to fly away. Her feet dangled a few inches above the grass, toes pointing away, and her face pointed back towards them, her head lolling, the wrong way round.

NEWT: Wow. That’s horrifying.

GUTH: Well, that wasn’t all. After all he’d just seen—the power of the devil, as I suppose he believed it was—Father McEwan rushed back to the Fosters’ house.
NEWT: Was Zilpha still there?

GUTH: She was. This account, we have from the assistant. Father McEwan came rushing in demanding to use their telephone. It was upheaval by that time. People were yelling, coming out from other houses, rushing into the yard. Father McEwan wanted to speak to Mr. Foster, but first he told his assistant to check on Zilpha. The assistant didn’t know what Father McEwan had seen, but he saw the look in the priest’s eyes. He crept back to the parlor to check on their prisoner. He slowly opened the side door. There she was, sitting, like they’d left her. She had long, dark hair, matted and sweaty after a night like that. She was bent forward, and in profile, all he could see was her hair, and her chest moving as she breathed.

He opened the door and started to come in. But it was then he noticed that something was amiss. She still had the rope on her wrists, but he saw that it was untied. There was something strange about her ear, poking through her hair. The curve, he realized. The curve was wrong.

Then she turned her head. Her hair slid down, and he saw that her face was pointing backwards. Her neck turned and turned, a quarter turn until she looked straight at him. Her body never moved. She smiled. There was blood and splinters in her mouth. She finished turning her head, all the way forward, leaned forward, and spit the blood and splinters onto the carpet.

It was a clothespin. She’d had a clothespin in her mouth.

HERMANN: Good god.

GUTH: Now, he was the only witness to this particular event. I’d bet he was just as sleep-deprived and hysterical as can be after a night of fruitless exorcising.

NEWT: I’m sure the doctor here would agree with you.

HERMANN: Was the clothespin verified by anyone else?

GUTH: The assistant swore it up and down, but when the police arrived, they couldn’t find it.

NEWT: So it was his testimony alone that incriminated Zilpha?

GUTH: His testimony reinforced the already unfavorable circumstances. A hysterically deranged girl in the middle of a fit, left alone for ten minutes, and next thing you know, the neighbor is dead? Not to mention the fact that it was the same neighbor who tipped her father off—to whatever she was doing, suicide or escape or what have you. People saw a revenge motive there. It was enough. She was never tried. They just carted her off to an institution and left her there til she died in 1969.

NEWT: ...Not exactly the basis for a family-friendly festival, if you ask me.

GUTH: Nor me, Mr. Geiszler. But by the ‘80s, most of the people who remembered the murder in 1935 were either dead or senile. No one remembered or cared about the fear and darkness that gripped this town.

HERMANN: Do you know who got the festival started? Was it municipal, an organization, a person?

GUTH: You know, I actually don’t. But the town clerk’s office would have those records. That’s over on Warren. Steve should be able to help you.

HERMANN: Is he in today?
GUTH: I can call him up for you.

HERMANN: I’d appreciate it.

*(sound of drawer opening, office supplies being rifled through)*

NEWT: I heard from a lot of folks that they’ve had sightings. Ghost sightings. Have you ever had one?

GUTH: Have I ever seen the ghost of Zilpha Foster? No, I haven’t.

NEWT: Zilpha? I thought the ghost was supposed to be the victim, Jane.

GUTH: *(still rifling)* Not the way I hear it.

NEWT: Interesting.

HERMANN: *(delicately sarcastic)* Very.

NEWT: *(clears throat)* And Ms. Guth, do these sightings always crop up around the festival?

GUTH: They started cropping up when the graves were robbed. Ah. Here it is. *(Clack of something being placed on a desk. Beeps as Guth begins dialing her phone.)*

NEWT: Graves?

GUTH: Yeah. I tell you, Dr. Gottlieb, I don’t know who started the festival itself. But it was around the time those punks desacrated the ceme—Hi, Steve? Yeah, it’s Alanna. Oh, yeah. Yeah. Listen I got a pair of fellas down here from Cambridge with some questions about the festival. Yeah. A professor and a... What did you say you were, Mr. Geiszler? A novelist?

NEWT: *(chuffed)* A journalist. Do I seem like a novelist?

GUTH: *(resumes talking on phone)* Mind if I send ‘em your way?

HERMANN: *(aside to Newt)* A graphic novelist, at best.

NEWT: *(delighted)* Ouch!

*(clack of phone hanging up)*

GUTH: He says to come on over.

*(sound of chair as Hermann stands)*

HERMANN: Thank you, Ms. Guth. You’ve been extremely helpful.

GUTH: Oh sure, sure. You come back round this afternoon for those copies before you take off.

HERMANN: I will. (...) Newton?

NEWT: ...I have a few more questions. You go ahead.

HERMANN: Oh. Certainly.

NEWT: Sorry. Grave robbing is a little more enticing than the town clerk.
HERMANN: Of course.

NEWT (VO): But Alanna Guth’s grave robbers weren’t the last twist in the story. Stay with us after the break.

SPONSOR BREAK #1

GUTH: Here it is. *(sound of packet hitting table)* May 1982.


NEWT: What happened?

GUTH: Both girls were buried in the churchyard—Jane in ‘35, and Zilpha thirty-four years later. In ‘81 someone dug both graves up. The police found empty caskets. Not a trace of their remains left.

NEWT: How... thorough. Did they ever catch who did it?

GUTH: No sir.

NEWT: And you said it was around this time that sightings started to go up?

GUTH: Sure. But it was around this time that the festival started, too.

NEWT: So the murder was back in the forefront of everyone’s mind.

GUTH: Exactly.

NEWT: But you believe all the ghost sightings are nothing more than power of suggestion.

GUTH: I’m skeptical, Mr. Geiszler. I’ve seen unholy things in my time. But I’ve seen too much of God’s power to believe He would let such a thing happen. He would never abandon such a troubled spirit to wander the earth, to go on troubling the living. No, I know He would let Zilpha Foster be at peace. There’s no such thing as ghosts.

NEWT: ... Not the line of rationalization I usually hear.

GUTH: (...) 

NEWT: I’m sort of interested in speaking to someone who *does* believe in the ghost of Zilpha Foster. Do you know anyone with a credible story?

GUTH: ...Not exactly credible. But I do know someone who would want to talk to you.

NEWT (VO): Alanna put me in touch with a young man named Ritchie Tolman. He told me over the phone he had *video proof* that he was very eager to share. Well I was very eager to see it. Maybe, if we were lucky (or, depending on your perspective, unlucky), I’d have a black tape for Dr. G after all.

TOLMAN: Here is good?

NEWT: Reading you loud and clear, Ritchie.
TOLMAN: Great. *(sound of shifting)*

NEWT: Excited?

TOLMAN: *(sniffs)* Nervous. But I want to tell my story.

NEWT: Well go for it. Describe for us your encounter with the ghost of Zilpha Foster.

TOLMAN: I can show you, like, I have video—

NEWT: That’s okay, I’d rather get it in your own words first.

TOLMAN: Okay. *(clears throat)* So I was driving home from work. I work at the school, the uh, the high school. I work nights. I’m a custodian. So I’m driving home. It’s probably 1ish. I drive the same way every night. I’ve never seen her, before, you know, the Foster girl. I just heard stories about her. Since, like, I was a kid. Most kids have the boogeyman, you know. In Coventry, we have the Foster girl. She’ll crack your neck, spin your head right around. I was never scared of her, though. I mean, I love horror movies. I love The Exorcist. Like, I’m all over that stuff.

So I’m driving home on Harland, same as I do every night. Lots of my friends say they see her, but I never believed it. I see someone walking by the side of the road. Then I realize it’s a girl, in a dress. I slow down a little as I get close. She’s walking the same direction I am, and I’m like, gonna offer her a ride, cause it’s late, and it’s not safe. You know. For women. But then I see that she’s in a nightgown and she has that stringy dark hair, you know, that *Grudge* hair. Naturally my mind goes right to Zilpha Foster. So I slow down and pull out my phone, of course.

NEWT: Of course.

TOLMAN: Right? So I pull out my phone and slow down. I start filming. I’ll show it to you. When I’m about 20 feet behind her, my headlights hit her. That’s when I see she’s walking backwards... Or at least... her arms and legs are moving like she’s walking backwards. That’s when I knew I was right. Cause I was looking at her front but all I could see was hair. No face. I have a real fight-or-flight moment cause I’m like, do I keep slow and keep filming, or do I punch it and get the *[expletive bleeped]* out of there?

NEWT: Right.

TOLMAN: Right. Well, I stayed steady until I got even with her, and I could really see. See her. Her head really was on backwards. I couldn’t believe it. Or, at least, it was forwards. And her body was backwards. Or at least, it was, until I pulled up next to her, and her head jerked around to look right at me. Dude I swear my heart never jumped like that. I thought I was gonna have a heart attack right there in my truck. I gunned it.

I lost control of the camera for a moment there, but then I got it back up and pointed it at my rearview. You still have a pretty good view of her. Cause she didn’t stop there. She started chasing me. Her arms and legs were spinning backwards, flying around like they were supposed to be going the other way... But God, could she move. And her eyes... they were so wide... watching me like that... I sped down Harland and when I hit the last curve, I braked just a bit. The red light lit her right up. She was slowing down. That was the last I saw of her.

NEWT: Wow. That sounds absolutely terrifying.

TOLMAN: You bet your *[expletive bleeped]* [expletive bleeped] that [expletive bleeped] was.

*(beat)*
TOLMAN: You wanna see that video?

NEWT: Yeah dude, you bet your [expletive bleeped] I do.

(sound of truck engine, slightly distorted through laptop speaker. Muffled, Tolman’s voice is audible, keeping a nervous commentary.)

NEWT (VO): ...The video was basically as Ritchie Tolman described. I couldn’t do it any more justice. Watching it, I felt a terrible chill. It was the way the figure moved. Ritchie was right. It ran wrong.

(Muffled, sound of Tolman’s voice, more panicked; distant bleeps as his monologue turns to cursing. Sound of engine revving and tires screeching.)

But it ran fast. It kept pace with the car for at least a few hundred yards.

What I couldn’t really see on Ritchie’s laptop was any face. It certainly looked like a girl in a nightgown, with long dark hair. When she turned to face him from the passenger window, it certainly was startling. But the way it’s framed, all you can see is her shoulders and head. We can’t really see if she’s “backwards” or “forwards.”

(background audio fades out. Interlude music #3 fades in.)

It occurred to me then that Dr. Gottlieb wouldn’t have approved of me listening to Ritchie’s story before viewing the footage. Now that I had heard Ritchie’s story, I was biased. He would have said to look at the evidence first. The cold hard facts.

But I suppose I don’t really see it that way. I don’t see Ritchie’s video evidence as cold hard facts. I see it as part of his experience. I mean, any account is subjective. I’m a journalist, I know that. But that includes film and photography too. There is always a choice of what you show and how, even unconscious or unintentional. There is always something you leave out of frame.

I tried to clear my mind. I watched it again. This time, I didn’t see a backwards head. I just saw a woman, running strangely.

But I also saw something else.

(audio clip plays again, sound of truck engine, Tolman’s voice)

NEWT: Is this the rearview?

TOLMAN: No, this, this is out the back window. I turned my camera around.

NEWT: Okay—stop it, right—there. (audio stops.) What’s that?

NEWT (VO): We’re looking at a frame towards the end, when Ritchie, like he described, hit the brakes. The figure is bathed in red light. It slows to a jog. But something was wrong. Not just its strange, pale limbs.

TOLMAN: Can’t you see? Those are her eyes.

(interlude music #1)

NEWT (VO): I was beyond excited to show this to Dr. G. I tried not to remember the last time I brought him “proof.”
TOLMAN: Before you go—there’s one thing you got wrong.

NEWT: What’s that?

TOLMAN: You said I saw the ghost of Zilpha Foster?

NEWT: Do you think it isn’t her? Do you believe it’s the ghost of Jane Mather?

TOLMAN: No, no. It’s not a ghost. It’s her. It’s Zilpha Foster.

NEWT: What?

TOLMAN: *(voice dropping)* No one dug up that grave. She got out by *herself.* And now she walks the streets of Coventry. It’s her. The *real* her. Ask anyone, man. That was a real, solid woman I saw. If I’d hit her with my truck, she would have dented the hood.

NEWT: But what about Jane Mather? Why would *she* climb out of her grave—

TOLMAN: She was the sacrifice. Zilpha snapped her neck in a deal with the devil, and she traded Jane’s life for eternal life for herself. Eternal life on *earth.* All she had to do was wait it out thirty years in that asylum. Pittance, compared with the time she has now...

   **NEWT (VO):** That threw me a bit, I admit. It was a good story, for sure. Zombie Zilpha has guest starred in a couple of my dreams since then. But I didn’t know how plausible it was... even for me.

HERMANN: He said Jane was a sacrifice?

NEWT: Yeah. That was where he kind of lost me.

HERMANN: I see—so satanic sacrifice is the limit of your credibility. Good to know.

NEWT: *(laughs)*

   **NEWT (VO):** Dr. Gottlieb and I reunited at the clerk’s office.

HERMANN: You said this young man showed you a video?

NEWT: Yes. But I’m saving that for last, because I think I really have something this time. You totally shot me down last time, but I defy you to explain this one. I *dare* you to.

HERMANN: It'll be my pleasure.

NEWT: *(laughs)* Tell me what you found.

HERMANN: Hans Olaf Alfven.

NEWT: Who now?

HERMANN: Hans Olaf Alven, local entrepreneur. He moved into town and bought the Coventry Hotel in 1974. For the next seven years profits dwindled, until he was at the point of bankruptcy. Then Alven came up with a nifty idea to boost tourism. A spooky myth, turned into a festival.

NEWT: Hmm.

HERMANN: He dubbed it the Festival of Paine, after the house. He threw the inaugural party in
1981. The first party was a semi-flop. He had some takers, but not many. The next spring, his fortunes changed.

NEWT: May 1982...

HERMANN: That’s right. After the grave thefts, festival attendance spiked. It’s grown every year since then.

NEWT: So have reported sightings.

HERMANN: Naturally.

NEWT: So you think Alven was responsible for the graves? Just to stir up interest in his weird festival?

HERMANN: It worked, didn’t it?

NEWT: Still, sort of a long con.

HERMANN: He didn’t have an alibi for the night of the grave desecration. The police interviewed him. I read the record.

NEWT: But?

HERMANN: Well, they didn’t have any other evidence. The only thing they had on him was a motive. Nothing even circumstantial, not even a footprint.

NEWT: There were no footprints at the cemetery?

HERMANN: Rainy night. They were all washed away.

NEWT: Hmm.

HERMANN: You don’t buy it?

NEWT: It’s plausible, but you have the same problem the police did. No proof.

HERMANN: Yet.

NEWT: Okay. But I, on the other hand... have the proof.

HERMANN: Of course. Your video.

NEWT: Yes. Yes. Get ready.

SPONSOR BREAK #2

NEWT (VO): I pulled up Ritchie Tolman’s video.

(recorded sounds of truck engine, Tolman yelling)

NEWT (VO): I watched Dr. Gottlieb closely. His face was impassive. As usual, totally unreadable. When the video ended, I asked him what he thought.

NEWT: Well?
HERMANN: It’s interesting. You would want to have it forensically verified, of course.

NEWT: Right. But you can get us in touch with the right people.

HERMANN: Certainly. Tell me, what is it that stands out to you about this video?

NEWT: Well... a few things.

   NEWT (VO): I had an ace in my hand. I wasn’t about to give it up right away.

NEWT: The way the figure moves is disturbing. So that’s unusual.

HERMANN: Unusual, but not supernatural. She could have a physical disability.

NEWT: The figure also runs really fast. It keeps up with the truck for a few hundred yards.

HERMANN: The truck isn’t going very fast. Probably not more than 30.

NEWT: The fastest man in the world can’t run more than 30 miles per hour.

HERMANN: Well this person isn’t. They’re falling behind, even before the driver brakes. It’s hard to say how fast they’re running. It’s fast, but certainly not an impossible speed.

NEWT: Sure, okay. But if that’s so, then we have to discount the disability theory. She can’t be physically disabled and a champion sprinter.

HERMANN: So she walks strangely. You’ve skipped the most obvious possibility, which is simply that she’s faking it.

NEWT: Faking? Walking weirdly, to freak strangers out?

HERMANN: It’s possible. Especially in a town with this mythos. It’s also possible the driver was in on it with her. This could be a well-planned hoax.

NEWT: (equable) I guess, I guess. But there’s one thing I don’t know how they could have faked.

HERMANN: And that is?

(sound of clicking. Audio plays again, briefly, then cuts off.)

NEWT: This.

   NEWT (VO): I froze it on the frame I discussed with Ritchie earlier. The one towards the end, where she’s slowing down in the middle of the road, lit up red in the brake lights.

HERMANN: What about it?

NEWT: These little lights.

HERMANN: Yes.

NEWT: In her face.

HERMANN: Yes.

NEWT: Her eyes.
HERMANN: Yes.

NEWT: But Hermann.

HERMANN: Yes?

NEWT: Humans’ eyes don’t reflect light.

HERMANN: (…)

NEWT: …What?

HERMANN: (…)

NEWT: Nothing? No rationalization..?

HERMANN: (…)

NEWT: Hermann? Why are you looking at me like that. Tell me. I thought for sure I had you on this. Tell me. You have to tell me.

HERMANN: You got this video from a man named Richard Tolman.

NEWT: ...Oh, my god. You’ve seen this before.

HERMANN: I was wondering if you would find him. (sound of shifting in seat) Yes, Mr. Tolman sent me this video last year. I found it quite interesting.

NEWT: Did you verify it?

HERMANN: I did. It hasn’t been tampered with. Most of it is ordinary, or at least, explainable. But the eyes, as you so astutely pointed out...

NEWT: So you can’t explain that?

HERMANN: Not yet.

NEWT: (realizing) ...And that’s what you came down here to look into. So, you lied to me! This isn’t just an ordinary case. Zilpha Foster is a black tape case.

HERMANN: Yes.

NEWT: You sneaky bastard! Oh my god. Why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t you interview Ritchie?

HERMANN: I’ve interviewed Mr. Tolman twice before. I did not find him a very credible or helpful witness. And I was curious if you would find him on your own. If you hadn’t, I would have shown you the tape when we returned to Cambridge.

NEWT: But I did.

HERMANN: And I’m very impressed. We should be going now. It’s at least a two-hour drive at this time of day.

(sound of chairs being pushed out, both standing up)

NEWT: (bemused) I can’t believe you tricked me.
HERMANN: I didn’t expect you to find Mr. Tolman in a single day. I predicted a follow-up.

NEWT: You underestimate me, Doctor.

NEWT (VO): I wasn’t really sure what to make of Dr. Gottlieb's deception. He said he was planning to tell me either way. I had lied to him by omission once before, so I suppose it was fair game. It was also funny. So I will give him that. But it made me think, or realize, he still didn't trust me much.

And did I trust him? Was he telling me everything? I already knew the answer was no. This didn't do much to increase my confidence.

All this was on my mind when, back in Boston, I sat down for a Skype interview with his former in-laws.

NEWT: Can you hear me?

OLDER MAN: (tinny through laptop speaker) Yep.

OLDER WOMAN: Yes!

NEWT: Great. Let's get started.

NEWT (VO): Mr. and Mrs. Leland live in Vermont, outside Burlington. They retired there from New York City, which is where Vanessa grew up.

NEWT: So, as my producer explained, we’re working on a story about Hermann Gottlieb.

MRS. LELAND: Yes.

NEWT: We’d like to get your comments on him, and your daughter’s disappearance back in 2002.

MR. LELAND: He did it.

MRS. LELAND: Well, we don’t know that.

MR. LELAND: We do.

NEWT: What makes you believe that, Mr. Leland?

MR. LELAND: Do you know he’s an atheist?

NEWT: Um...

MR. LELAND: A godless man. It’s no wonder he killed her.

MRS. LELAND: Terrence!

MR. LELAND: What?

NEWT: What?

MRS. LELAND: (to Newt) We don’t believe she’s dead.

NEWT: You believe she’s still alive? After ten years?

MRS. LELAND: We got a postcard from her a couple years ago.
MR. LELAND: Not this nonsense again, Jean. *(To Newt)* It isn’t from her. It was mailed to us by mistake.

MRS. LELAND: *(arguing)* It’s her handwriting.

MR. LELAND: It’s unsigned. And it’s *not* her handwriting. What did the police say? When we showed it to them?

MRS. LELAND: You know who you sound like? You sound just like him.

MR. LELAND: *(belligerent)* Him *who?*

MRS. LELAND: *Hermann.*

*NEWT (VO):* Mrs. Leland emailed me a photo of the postcard. It’s a beautiful wetland scene, with birds taking off into a sunset sky. On the front it says *Greetings from the Everglades.* The back is postmarked Homestead, Florida. The message, printed in neat pen script, is “Thinking of you.” There is no signature.

NEWT: Thank you for sending me the postcard, Mrs. Leland.

MRS. LELAND: Of course, of course.

NEWT: So, like you said, Mr. Leland, the card is unsigned. It has your address on it, but not your names. Mrs. Leland, could you tell me what makes you think it’s from your daughter?

MR. LELAND: *(grumbling)* It’s not her.

MRS. LELAND: *(ignoring him)* Florida was her favorite place in the world. Ever since she was a kid.

MR. LELAND: No, *when* she was a kid, and we took her to Disney World. She was *nine* years old, Jean.

MRS. LELAND: It was *her*, Terrence.

NEWT: Mr. Leland, in 2002 you publicly stated that you thought Hermann Gottlieb was responsible for your daughter’s disappearance. You still believe that, correct?

MR. LELAND: That’s right, son.

NEWT: How can you be so sure?

MR. LELAND: The evidence points right to him. No one else. He was the only one with her at the time. She was planning on divorce.

MRS. LELAND: Well, we don’t know that for sure.

MR. LELAND: She asked me to find her a lawyer.

MRS. LELAND: No, that was for something else. She found out something about him. Some secret.

MR. LELAND: Then that's what it was. And he wanted to keep her quiet.

NEWT: What kind of information was that, Mrs. Leland?
MRS. LELAND: I don't know. She never told me.

MR. LELAND: I mean, what kind of husband vanishes for five days after his wife vanishes?

NEWT: He—he disappeared?

MR. LELAND: For five whole days. Does that sound like an innocent man to you, son?

NEWT: Did Gottlieb explain why? When he came back?

MR. LELAND: You’d have to ask him yourself. By the time he came back, we had already hired a lawyer and taken an... an adversarial position.

NEWT: I see. Well, thank you for taking the time.

MRS. LELAND: I can send you more of Vanessa’s handwriting samples, if you like. To compare to the postcard.

MR. LELAND: Jane, the police already—

NEWT: That would be very kind of you, Mrs. Leland.

   NEWT (VO): We did have a handwriting expert look at the samples. The results were inconclusive. We’re continuing our investigation into Vanessa Gottlieb’s disappearance, and we’ll have more on it next time. We’re left with the question: what makes a husband disappear for five days right after his wife vanishes?

   Next time, I ask him that very question. We’ll have that, and a new black tape case, next time.

   I’m Newton Geiszler. It’s the Black Tapes Podcast. See you next time.
VOICEOVER: The Black Tapes is in part an exploration of belief and the search for truth, and in part a profile of the founder of the Gottlieb Institute, professional skeptic Dr. Hermann Gottlieb. Our story is progressing in order, week by week. So, if you’re a first-time listener, welcome to the show! Go start at episode one. Don’t worry. I’ll wait.

(Familiar theme music fades in)

From CTC Studios and the WGBH Podcast Network, welcome to the Black Tapes Podcast. I’m Newt Geiszler.

(Theme music plays: acoustic guitar, church bells, a faraway female voice.)

NEWT: Welcome back.

(interlude music #1 plays)

NEWT (VO): Welcome to episode five. It’s been five months working on this project. In a way, it feels like no time at all. But sometimes, I feel like I’ve been at it my whole career—throwing rocks at Dr. Gottlieb’s window, hoping he’ll finally come out and tell me if ghosts are real.

He won’t, of course. But I think that Dr. G has been invigorated by our project too. The podcast seems to have awoken a fierce desire in him to solve the tapes.

This week, he takes us into the weird, wild world of the ouija board. First, we have an update from Mako on the Vanessa Gottlieb case.

Mako has been doing a lot of heavy lifting. She’s been speaking to Vanessa’s friends, family, the police on the original case, and witnesses from the gas station where she disappeared. This week, she took a different angle.

NEWT: So, how was your trip?

MAKO: Humid. I don’t know how people live in Florida. It’s like breathing in bog water.

NEWT: (laughs) Too true. So what did you find?

MAKO: I went to Homestead, Florida, which is near the Everglades. That’s where maybe-Vanessa’s postcard to her parents was postmarked. I interviewed the postmistress there, Alexandra Smoot. Don’t laugh, it’s her real name.

NEWT: Any relation to the unit of measurement?

MAKO: No, nerd. Ms. Smoot has been the postmistress in Homestead for 30 years. Her
hair is huge. She’s very chatty. Not afraid to say what she thinks.

NEWT: Not always great, in a Floridian.

MAKO: Well, I showed her a picture of Vanessa and it didn’t jog her memory. At first. She said she might have known her, might not. I told her about Vanessa’s life. She looked thoughtful. Then she went in the back. She got this list out and started reading it to herself. I asked what it was.

SMOOT: ...List of safety deposit boxes. By last name. I think this picture does look familiar. I’ve got a feeling it’s one of these.

MAKO: Really?

SMOOT: Can I see it again sweetheart? Thanks.

(beat)

SMOOT: Alice Sunyaev.

MAKO: Who?

SMOOT: That’s her. Alice Sunyaev. I remember when she opened her box. She got a PO box too.

MAKO: In 2004?

SMOOT: No, no. Must have been the late 90s. ’97, maybe even ’96. She used to come by pretty regular, get her mail. Sometimes she’d look in her deposit box. That’s her private business, of course.

MAKO: So she’s a regular?

SMOOT: Used to be. We made small talk. But I haven’t seen her for a few years.

MAKO: When was the last time you saw her?

SMOOT: I couldn’t say. But it was a couple years. Maybe around the time that postcard was sent.

MAKO: Is she still paying for her boxes?

SMOOT: She paid in advance for both, according to this. She’s all set through 2020.

MAKO: Do you know if she lived nearby?

SMOOT: Nah, Alice didn’t tell me anything about herself that I can remember.

MAKO: I’m going to give you my number. Will you call us if you do remember anything else?

SMOOT: Certainly. And I’ll call if she comes back in to get her mail.

MAKO: (laughs politely) Thank you.

NEWT: Wow. That’s amazing.

MAKO: It’s pretty great. As far as I can tell, the police were never aware of Ms. Smoot.

NEWT: And you have the gas station interviews later this week, right?
MAKO: That’s right. Next week I’m going up to Acadia to interview the workers at the gas station where she was last seen.

NEWT: Great. Do we have any other updates?

MAKO: We’re still looking into the Nephi case. We don’t have any new leads on the Caravaggio painting, or Dan Penrose’s death—or rather, we have leads, but nothing substantial yet. I’m digging into them. We’ve also lost touch with the drummer, Tomás Hawking. He hasn’t been answering our calls, and his family does not know where he is.


MAKO: I am!

NEWT (VO): We’ll have more on both of these threads later in this episode. But for now, we cross the river for a visit to the Gottlieb Institute.

(sound of button click, someone opening a container)

NEWT: So what have you got for us this week, Dr. G? A real VHS, huh?

HERMANN: (bemused) That’s right. I think you’ll be interested in what’s on it.

NEWT: And what’s on it?

HERMANN: Are you familiar with spirit boards? More commonly known as ouija boards?

NEWT: In theory. Is this a tape of you and your college buddies messing with one in a cabin?

HERMANN: Hardly.

NEWT: (teasing) Disappointing.

HERMANN: (amused) It’s actually a very interesting experiment. It was done at MIT in 1990.

NEWT (VO): Dr. Gottlieb started the tape. Let me describe the layout of the experiment. A group of six people sit around a circular table in a small room. We see it from a raised angle—the camera is mounted high in a corner, near the ceiling. On the table in the middle is a ouija board, the kind you’ve seen before: tan, alphabet, visibly large “yes” and “no,” with the little arrowhead that moves to give the “answers.” Or, that you and your friends move, depending on your beliefs.

FEMALE VOICE: Hello. Is anyone there? If you are there, please speak with us. We would like to speak with you.

(click—video pauses)

HERMANN: The woman speaking is in charge of the experiment. The other five people are random volunteers.

NEWT: Why were they testing ouija boards at MIT?

HERMANN: They were testing... various phenomena. You’ll see.

(video resumes)
PROCTOR: Is someone there? If you are there, please tell us.

(sliding sound)

PROCTOR: Yes.

PARTICIPANT: Whoa.

PROCTOR: Hello. Will you tell us your name?

(sliding sound, stopping and starting as they spell the word)

PROCTOR: (reading) J... O... H... N. John. Is that your name?

(sliding sound)

PROCTOR: Yes.

(tape pauses)

NEWT: Okay. So I’m guessing you believe the volunteers were moving it themselves.

HERMANN: Yes.

NEWT: But why? What would be in it for them? It’s not like they were being paid more for positive results.

HERMANN: Have you ever heard of the ideomotor reflex?

NEWT: No. What’s that?

HERMANN: It’s a physiological phenomenon, wherein a thought or preconceived notion bring about an automatic muscular reaction. The action is so automatic that it seems the person did not do it of their own volition. And usually, the action is of such a small degree that the subject is not aware of it. It’s similar to our reflexive reaction to something like pain; but instead, the body reacts unconsciously to an idea. There has been a lot of research on the ideomotor reflex in connection with automatic writing, dowsing, and...

NEWT: …and ouija boards. (sounding interested) Huh!

HERMANN: The people in this experiment aren’t doing it on purpose. But they are doing it. They are so focused on the task that they’ll move the planchette, no matter their intentions.

NEWT: The planchette is the arrow-thing in the middle?

HERMANN: Yes.

NEWT: Okay. I get what you’re saying, but I don’t think the effect explains how they spelled out a name.

HERMANN: It will make sense in the second part of the experiment.

(click—tape resumes)

NEWT: They’re all blindfolded...

HERMANN: Exactly. Watch what happens.
PROCTOR: John, we’d like to ask you some questions. John, are you still there?

(planchette slides across board)

PROCTOR: Yes.

NEWT: Hey. That wasn’t a yes. It went to “F.”

HERMANN: Keep watching.

PROCTOR: John, would you mind answering some questions?

(planchette slides)

PROCTOR: Yes.

NEWT: Why did she say yes? It didn’t go anywhere near “yes.”

HERMANN: She wants the test subjects to believe it’s working.

NEWT: (understanding) Oh... Of course.

HERMANN: She’s seeing if they spell things out when they have blindfolds, and can’t see what they’re spelling. Naturally, they don’t.

NEWT: Wow. Huh.

HERMANN: It goes on for a while. You get the gist. Now I’m going to show you the second day of the experiment.

(fast-forwarding sound)

(loud click as it stops)

NEWT: Same test, new subjects?

HERMANN: Same proctor, same test. New subjects. And...

NEWT: (looking at something) Oh. New board. It’s black.

HERMANN: Yes. I’m going to skip to the second part, with the blindfolds.

(video plays)

PROCTOR: Are you there, Isaac?

NEWT: Is Isaac their ghost?

HERMANN: Yes.

NEWT: Spooky.

(video continues)

PROCTOR: Isaac, would you like to continue speaking with us?

(planchette scrapes across board)
PROCTOR: Yes.

NEWT: Whoa. They actually moved it to “yes.”

HERMANN: They did.

NEWT (VO): Remember, the test subjects are blindfolded now. But unlike yesterday, the proctor isn’t lying. They actually did hit “yes.”

PROCTOR: Isaac, when did you die? Can you tell us when you died?

(planchette slides bit by bit on board as it spells...)

PROCTOR: 1... 9... 8... 8.

NEWT: Wow. They’re actually doing it.

PROCTOR: ...1988.

MAN: Oh my god. (sounding stricken) I know him. That was... that was a friend of mine. He died in 1988.

NEWT: Whoa. What are the odds of that?

PROCTOR: Where did you die, Isaac? Can you tell us where you died?

(planchette slides, quickly)

PROCTOR: No. Okay. Can you tell us how you died?

(pause)

PROCTOR: Isaac? Do you remember how you died?

(planchette slides, quickly, stopping and starting)

PROCTOR: M... U... R... D... E... R.

MAN: Professor. I need to stop this experiment. I can’t do this.

PROCTOR: Please, Edwin, don’t move. Isaac, do you know some—

(planchette slides abruptly)

PROCTOR: Okay, Isaac. Stop.

(planchette slides frantically)

PROCTOR: Isaac! Stop!

(sound of planchette sliding violently, cuts off abruptly)

(thump as planchette hits the floor)

(buzzing sound)

(pause)
PROCTOR: (stricken) Oh my god.

(tape ends)

NEWT: What the hell happened?

HERMANN: There was a short circuit and the lights went out.

NEWT: But the professor—the proctor, why did she say “oh my god”? Did she see something? It looked like she saw something.

HERMANN: It’s not clear.

NEWT: It looked like she was looking across the room from her. Right under the camera. Looking at something.

HERMANN: Yes. In the camera’s blind spot. So there’s nothing on the film.

NEWT: Did you ever interview her? The proctor?

HERMANN: Yes.

NEWT: What did she say?

HERMANN: Her report was... unreliable.

NEWT: What did she say.

HERMANN: (reluctant) She said she saw a shadow.

NEWT: A tall shadow?

HERMANN: Something like that.

NEWT: Sounds familiar.

HERMANN: Don’t make me say it, Newton.

NEWT: (laughs) Sure. Pareidolia. Okay. Still, that doesn’t answer how the test subjects spelled all that stuff out on the ouija board. They still had blindfolds on. How did they do that?

HERMANN: Well first of all, it wasn’t an ouija board.

NEWT: No?

HERMANN: No. The ouija board is a 19th century invention, mainly a salon and parlor trick. It was a form of entertainment. But after a while, some groups of people grew dissatisfied with the way their spirit board was being used as a silly game. According to legend, this group created another board for more serious communications.

NEWT: “Serious” communications? With...?

HERMANN: Demons. They called it the demon board.

NEWT: (intrigued) Sweet.

HERMANN: (slight laugh)
NEWT: How do you know about these, these Mirrorverse ouija boards? I’ve never heard of them.

HERMANN: My father had one.

NEWT: *(startled)* Your—father? Why did he have one?

HERMANN: His line of work was in... antiquities. He traveled around collecting rare items such as this, appraising them, and selling them.

NEWT: Wow. That sounds fascinating.

HERMANN: It was.

NEWT: You’ve never mentioned your father before.

HERMANN: We weren’t very close.

NEWT (VO): I was surprised when Dr. Gottlieb mentioned his father. I think it was the first time in the last five months where he volunteered a detail about his private life. And his father’s profession was extremely interesting. “Antiquities dealer.” How Indiana Jones was it? Or were they mostly occult objects like the demon board? Had this relationship with his father awoken his interest in the supernatural? But where his father participated in its economy, Hermann sought to debunk it. What was the story behind that? I wanted desperately to ask.

We set about tracking down the participants and researchers from the study. It was so long ago—22 years—that it took us a while. But we found them eventually—some of them.

Stay with us after the break.

SPONSOR BREAK #1

NEWT: Hello, is this Henry Lorentz?

LORENTZ: Speaking.

NEWT: Hi. This is Newt Geiszler from the GBH Podcast Network. We spoke via email.

LORENTZ: Oh. Hi.

NEWT: Is this a good time?

NEWT (VO): I was speaking to Henry Lorentz, who is a professor of psychology at UPenn. Twenty-two years ago, he was a grad student at MIT studying the ideomotor reflex and the subconscious. He spent the summer as a research assistant in the lab of Dr. Michelle Kaku. You heard from her earlier: she was the one administering the ouija test. Dr. Kaku died in 2000.

NEWT: So, you completed your graduate thesis under Dr. Kaku in the early 90’s, is that right?

LORENTZ: *(sounding wary)* That’s correct.

NEWT: Did you like working with her? Can you tell us about her?
LORENTZ: Yes, certainly. She was an exemplary scientist, very sharp. She always told us she didn’t have any time for nonsense, but if you needed her, she was there. She was caring under that lab coat exterior. Even a little arch. Her methods were exacting, but creative.

NEWT: Creative. Is that how the ouija board come into it?

LORENTZ: Yes, I believe it was Dr. Kaku’s idea. It’s not an uncommon way to test the ideomotor phenomenon.

NEWT: Do you remember why you started using the other board?

LORENTZ: What other board?

NEWT: On the second day of the experiment, Dr. Kaku used a different board for the test. It was black rather than tan. Do you remember that?

LORENTZ: The specifics of the board weren’t very important. We were testing the psychological effect.

NEWT: Okay. Do you remember the second day of the test, though?

LORENTZ: (wary) Yes. Things... got a bit out of hand.

NEWT: How so?

LORENTZ: There was a power outage. It caused some chaos. You say you saw the tape, right?

NEWT: I did. There was definitely chaos. At one point, Dr. Kaku looked up towards the camera and said “Oh my god.” Do you remember that?

LORENTZ: Like I said, the power went out.

NEWT: Yes, this was just before that. Before the lights go out, she looks up, and says “oh my god.” She definitely sees something.

LORENTZ: Are you working with that paranormal investigator? The one with the million dollar prize?

NEWT: Dr. Gottlieb? Yes.

LORENTZ: (stiffly) He already interviewed Dr. Kaku.

NEWT: Well we’re... reopening the case.

LORENTZ: I’m sorry. I just don’t know what I could add, really.

NEWT: Well, we sort of just wanted your corroboration on some details...

LORENTZ: (quickly) She had a brain tumor, you know.

NEWT: Sorry?

LORENTZ: Dr. Kaku. She was diagnosed with brain cancer a few years after that. They took the tumor out, but it came back. That’s what she died from. Brain cancer.

NEWT: That’s terrible. I’m sorry.
LORENTZ: No. Yes. It is. But what I’m saying is, it could have been affecting her vision for years.

NEWT: Affecting in what way? What did she see, Henry?

(beat)

LORENTZ: (unwillingly) She said she saw something... standing in the room.

NEWT: What did it look like?

LORENTZ: Dark.

NEWT: Tall?

LORENTZ: Yes.

NEWT: As high as the camera?

LORENTZ: Yes.

NEWT: How high would that have been?

LORENTZ: Eight feet. Maybe nine.

NEWT: Did anyone else say they saw this figure?

LORENTZ: (quietly) Yes.

NEWT: Who?

LORENTZ: One of the subjects. I don’t remember his name.

NEWT: Was it Edwin?

LORENTZ: I don’t remember.

NEWT (VO): It took some convincing, but Dr. Lorentz was willing to give us his old files and help us track down the list of test subjects. We sent some interns to help him go through the boxes. But it would take some time.

I was a little taken aback by his reluctance. Why was he so unwilling to revisit this case? It turned out Lorentz wasn’t the only one.

After some searching, he was able to get us in touch with the person who provided the demon board. Mako and I had to trace it down a line of buyers and collectors. It took quite a bit of digging. But finally, we found him.

MALE VOICE: You must be Mr. Geiszler.

NEWT: Please, call me Newt! You must be Rick.

FEINMAN: That’s me. Come on in.

NEWT (VO): Rick Feinman is a collector of talking boards. He’s an executive on the committee of the American Spirit Board Preservation Foundation. He was gracious enough to give me a tour of his private collection in Connecticut.
FEINMAN: This one is the Expirito—it’s also called the Revelator. It was made by the W.S. Reed Company in 1891.

NEWT: Neat!

FEINMAN: And this one (sound of box opening) is an early William Fuld design, dating back to 1902. Look at the bird’s eye maple top!

NEWT: Wow. That’s a beautiful grain.

FEINMAN: It is!

NEWT: I was wondering. Do you have anything older?

FEINMAN: Older than these? Hm... I have some 19th-century planchettes. Are you a practitioner, Mr. Geiszler?

NEWT: Me? No. I’m just doing research for one of our shows.

FEINMAN: Oh, of course.

NEWT: There’s actually a... specific board I’m interested in.

FEINMAN: Oh? Well if I don’t have one, I’m sure I can put you in touch with someone who does. Who’s the maker?

NEWT: The board I’m looking for is called a demon board. We’re trying to track down a specific one that was used in a particular experiment in the early 90s. We traced it back to you. You bought it a few years ago—is that right?

(beat)

NEWT: Mr. Feinman?

FEINMAN: Do you believe in talking boards, Mr. Geiszler? Have you ever used one?

NEWT: I’ve never used one, no. I take it you believe?

FEINMAN: I’m not just a collector. I’m a practitioner. You don’t get into this field just for the...

NEWT: ...Historical significance?

FEINMAN: No.

(beat)

NEWT: So... Could I see that board?

FEINMAN: (stiffly) It’s not for sale.

NEWT: No no, I’d just like to take some pictures.

FEINMAN: Why?

NEWT: Just... for the show.

FEINMAN: (reluctantly) ...Wait here a moment.
NEWT: Thanks.

NEWT (VO): Feinman disappeared for a while. It sounded like he went down into the cellar. He had gone from jovial to anxious when I asked him about the demon board; when he came back with it, he seemed downright nervous.

FEINMAN: I believe this is what you’re looking for.

NEWT (VO): It was. If it wasn’t the same one from the tape, it was one very close to it. It was unlike any ouija board I’d seen before. It was black, maybe wood, but it was buffed so shiny that it looked like obsidian. The lettering was mother-of-pearl. There were symbols around the edges. I saw a moon and a sun, but the rest were unfamiliar to me.

NEWT: Do you have the planchette that goes with it?

FEINMAN: (strictly) I keep that in a separate area of the house.

NEWT: Oh. Um. Do you mind if I ask why?

FEINMAN: Mr. Geiszler, you can see that this looks like a regular talking board. It is not. With a regular talking board, we talk to the spirits of the deceased. It’s peaceful. Like a telephone line to our departed.

This board is not like that. It’s unique, and extremely powerful. This is the only one of its kind in the world. Rather than communication with the deceased, this board was made for communication with... something else.

NEWT: With what?

FEINMAN: Darkness. Malevolent spirits. Evil. This is the only one. You would not believe the obscene amounts of money people have offered me for it. But I would never sell it. I cannot allow this board to reenter the world. In the past, some people have used it the same way they would use a regular ouija board. I shudder to think what damage that did. No, it’s safer here, kept separate from its planchette.

NEWT: What sort of damage could it do?

FEINMAN: Are you a believer, young man?

NEWT: Um. Call me open-minded.

FEINMAN: (firmly) Spirits are real. Whether you believe or not. People who use a ouija board to talk to, say, the spirit of their dead parents? If they reach them, they find peace. But the people who have used this to try to contact their loved ones... Their lives are changed forever. They reach out, expecting to contact their mother or father. Instead, they find themselves speaking with an intelligent, powerful, ancient demon. Inviting him into our world, unwittingly. Did you know that demons are very adept at mimicry?

NEWT: Um... No, I didn’t know that.

FEINMAN: You don’t look convinced.

NEWT: Well...
FEINMAN: Do I seem unstable to you, young man?

NEWT: No.

FEINMAN: Do I seem like the kind of man who would keep this board’s planchette locked away for no good reason?

NEWT: It doesn’t work without the planchette?

FEINMAN: No. It has no power. This way, it’s safe.

(*interlude music #1*)

NEWT (VO): I brought the photos of the board back to Dr. G. He was a lot more interested than I expected.

HERMANN: This is a fascinating artifact. Look at this. Can you zoom in?

(*click, click*)

NEWT: There?

HERMANN: Yes. Look at that.

NEWT: The pentagram?

HERMANN: Yes. In two concentric circles.

NEWT: Huh. I don’t think that looks familiar to me. Have you seen it before?

HERMANN: I believe so. Could you send me these pictures?

NEWT: Of course.

HERMANN: I’d like to send them to a friend—someone who knows more about these particular symbols here.

NEWT: What are those?

HERMANN: It’s known as sacred geometry. They’re equations—the symbols are adapted from ancient sumerian, and the equations themselves are from the middle ages. It’s dark alchemy. A mathematical form of devil worship.

NEWT: Wow. That sounds fascinating.

HERMANN: It’s not my area of expertise. But it’s quite interesting. Very obscure.

NEWT: Neat. So you didn’t look at this board during your initial investigation?

HERMANN: I tried, but I couldn’t find the owner. I had a different theory—I thought the participants were coached.

NEWT: Were they?

HERMANN: None of them would admit to it.

NEWT: Did it seem like they were lying?
HERMANN: Frankly, no. Actually, I have something to show you.

(sound of a box being moved, items shifting)

HERMANN: I dug up my materials from my initial investigation, back in 1997.

NEWT: Wow. Throwback. Any Pearl Jam albums in there?

HERMANN: I don’t know what that is. But I do have a tape you’ll want to hear. It’s the testimony of Dr. Kaku.

NEWT: Oh, sweet. Hermann, you do know how to treat a guy.

HERMANN: (amused) Don’t get too excited. Like I told you before, her testimony was... unreliable at best.

NEWT: ...And at worst?

HERMANN: Distraught.

NEWT (VO): He wasn’t kidding. Here is an excerpt of Dr. Kaku’s tape. It was recorded in ‘97, seven years after the initial experiment.

DR. KAKU: (muttering) I can’t describe what I saw. No. I can’t. I won’t. I won’t... I’ve seen it every day since.

It’s tall. It’s tall, but not shapeless—vague in some places, defined too sharply in others. This is the nature of memory. I study this. It should not have been so in person. Yet it was. He was vague in some places and photo sharp in others.

It was tall, so, tall, almost as high as the ceiling. Yes. And dark, its skin was pale but dark like it was dirty, like a film of gray dirt. I couldn’t see much between its head and feet. Only the way its legs stretched impossibly.

His eyes. I couldn’t see them. Not at first.

His hands. His hands were reaching for the man.

Then I saw him smile.

NEWT (VO): She goes on like that for a while. It’s my understanding she was quite ill at this point. Hallucination or not, the tape, as a whole, was... quite disturbing. This voice did not match up with the vivacious person Dr. Lorentz described, nor the lucid scientist I had watched on the other tape. She had... crumbled. Illness, or this experience, had done something terrible to her.

(beep—phone message)

LORENTZ: Hi, Mr. Geiszler, it’s Henry Lorentz again. We found the name of the man you were looking for, the witness from the experiment. It’s Edwin [beeped]. He was a nursing student at the time. His last address is [beeped].

NEWT (VO): After the break, we speak with Edwin, who asked that we leave his last name out. Suffice it to say, his memories were closer to Dr. Kaku’s than I was comfortable with.

SPONSOR BREAK #2
NEWT (VO): Edwin is now a nurse in Vermont. He didn’t want us to share any personal details about him, but he agreed to a phone interview after a long shift at the hospital where he works.

NEWT: So, Edwin, you participated in that MIT study about the ideomotor reflex. Do you mind telling us a little about that experiment?

EDWIN: (hesitant) Um... yeah. Sure. It was based around the ouija boards. I think they tested a few groups each day. My group played with one in the morning, and it was alright. You know—alright for 50 bucks. In the afternoon, though, they brought out a different board. With that one, things were... different. I don’t know why. But something about that board made the experiment... frightening.

NEWT: Could you tell us about that board? What was different about it?

EDWIN: Well, it was black. Like ebony. I don’t know what it was made of. It was beautiful, actually. The carving was very intricate. I remember thinking it was probably an antique. But when we used it, the group didn’t have that feeling like we did with the ouija board—sort of a dangerous thrill. The dark board had... I don’t know. A different feeling. A weird feeling. It kind of had a smell, actually.

NEWT: (surprised) A smell?

EDWIN: Yeah.

NEWT: Can you describe it?

EDWIN: It was sickly sweet, kind of chemical. Like gasoline, or maybe like a gas stove—like the smell the gas company puts in so you can tell your stove is leaking and turn it off before it kills you. It was distracting. I think it made me a little lightheaded. That smell was on my hands, still, after the test was over.

NEWT: Huh.

EDWIN: It was horrible. Honestly. It’s upsetting, still, to think about that test. I wish I had never taken part.

NEWT: Was it because you thought you knew the spirit your group reached?

EDWIN: The spirit?

NEWT: Isaac—wasn’t that his name? You said he was a friend of yours. And then you asked Dr. Kaku to stop the experiment.

EDWIN: (upset) Oh... yes.

NEWT: Do you mind telling us how you knew Isaac?

EDWIN: He was my ex.

NEWT: (surprised, sensitive) Oh?

EDWIN: Yes. He did die in 1988. When that test took place, in 1990, I was still in the closet. It was
so frightening to hear his name out of nowhere.

NEWT: That sounds really upsetting.

EDWIN: (quietly) It was. I was afraid it was a joke, or a trick. But it wasn’t. I could... feel him in there. His spirit.

NEWT: (also quiet) Really?

EDWIN: I thought so. For a moment. But then...

NEWT: Then what?

EDWIN: (sharper) Well, then we asked the spirit how it died. Isaac wasn’t murdered. He died in a car crash in New Jersey.

NEWT: Oh. So you don’t believe it was him?

EDWIN: ...You saw the video, right?

NEWT: Yes.

EDWIN: Did you see the report?

NEWT: Report? No. Was there a report?

EDWIN: (emphatically) Yes. Dr. Kaku took my testimony, she debriefed me. I told her what I saw. I thought she saw it too.

NEWT: And what was it you saw?

EDWIN: I... Well, after we asked our last question, there was a strange sound. It was a buzzing, like a power surge. The sweet gas smell was overwhelming by then. Then the planchette went out of control—it scraped across the board and flew out of our hands. It was very startling.

Then, Dr. Kaku said “oh my god.” I yanked off my blindfold and whipped around right... right before the lights went out. 

(pause)

NEWT: (quiet) What did you see?

EDWIN: (voice low, tight with fear) I can’t... describe it... that thing. It was just standing there, behind me. It was so close. It towered over me. And it was so dark. It was so dark I couldn’t see almost anything, like, any features, like, it was like the light just sucked right into it. But I could see its shape. It had two legs, like an animal, like, like a deer or a moose. And its arms were long... so long. And it had hair... long, matted hair, covering its face. But I could still see its face.

NEWT: How?

EDWIN: I could see it through the hair. Because it was smiling. I could see its teeth.

NEWT: Oh.

EDWIN: And I could see its eyes. They were huge, horrible, dull white, like dead lightbulbs. But the... the thing was...
NEWT: *(quiet)* What?

EDWIN: Its eyes were... below its smile. Like its face was... was upside-down.

NEWT: *(genuinely startled)* Oh my god.

EDWIN: *(shuddering sigh)* And then the lights went out. It was gone.

NEWT: How could you tell it was gone, in the dark?

EDWIN: *(firmly)* It was gone. I knew. I could feel it there, and then I could feel it wasn’t there. The sound stopped, and the smell. But I could never get them out of my head.

NEWT: Wow. That sounds... absolutely terrifying.

EDWIN: *(low)* There was something else.

NEWT: Something else?

EDWIN: Well, there was a moment, like I said, where I really thought it was Isaac. Where I thought Isaac was in there with us.

NEWT: Right.

EDWIN: Well *(sounding very uncomfortable)* right before we asked... before we asked the spirit how it died... I felt Isaac stroke my hair.

NEWT: *(upset)* What?

EDWIN: I felt him stroke my hair. I had long hair, back then. When we were together he used to... brush it back from my face.

NEWT: And you felt that? In there?

EDWIN: *(upset)* Yes.

NEWT: Can... Is there anything else you remember?

EDWIN: *(upset)* No, no... Not really. I felt like I was in a trance, with that blindfold on, with that smell. I can still hear Dr. Kaku calling out those numbers. God, I haven’t thought so much about this in years.

NEWT: I know it’s difficult. I’m sorry.

EDWIN: *(pulling himself together)* But I think she was right.

NEWT: Dr. Kaku? Right about what?

EDWIN: Well, when she debriefed me, I told her about seeing... that thing. She said it was probably just my imagination. With the blindfold and the concentration, she said I had fallen into a self-hypnotic state. That made me see shapes in the darkness. She said it wasn’t unusual.

NEWT: She didn’t say she had seen anything?

EDWIN: No, no.

NEWT: Huh.
EDWIN: And none of it was real anyway.

NEWT: How do you mean?

EDWIN: Well, we only spelled real words when we were looking. With the blindfold on, we just spelled out nonsense.

NEWT: She—Dr. Kaku told you that you were spelling out nonsense?

EDWIN: Yes. It was the ideomotor effect. That’s what they were testing.

NEWT: Oh.

EDWIN: Imaginary or not, I wanted to put the whole thing behind me.

NEWT: ...Edwin, you knew they were filming those experiments?

EDWIN: Yes.

NEWT: Like I said, I saw the film. But the film shows that you... Well, when you were blindfolded, you actually did spell those things out.

EDWIN: *(startled)* What?

NEWT: Yes. The year, and the cause of death.

EDWIN: No. No, that’s impossible.

NEWT: My colleague believes you and the other participants may have been coached. That you were told what to spell...

EDWIN: *(horrified)* No, no, no, no. That’s not true.

NEWT: Not true, that you weren’t coached? Or...?

*(pause)*

NEWT: Edwin?

EDWIN: I have to go. Don’t—don’t contact me again.

NEWT: Edwin—!

*(dial tone)*

*(interlude music #3)*

NEWT (VO): This interview left me with a lot of really troubling questions. Had Dr. Kaku taken Edwin’s testimony, lied to him, and destroyed the report? If she had, I know it was to protect him. But from what? What was it that they saw?

I found myself a bit shaken by Edwin’s testimony. I tried to imagine one of my ex-boyfriends reaching out to me via ouija board. I did not envy him one bit.

I went back to the video. I wanted to see how it matched up with Edwin’s story.

*(audio from earlier plays)*
PROCTOR: Isaac, when did you die? Can you tell us when you died?

(planchette slides bit by bit)

PROCTOR: 1... 9... 8... 8... 1988.

EDWIN: Oh my god (sounding stricken). I know him. That was... that was a friend of mine. He died in 1988.

PROCTOR: Where did you die, Isaac? Can you tell us where you died?

(planchette slides)

PROCTOR: No.

(click as tape pauses)

NEWT (VO): (sounding grim) There. I saw it. Right after Dr. Kaku asks about where the spirit died, Edwin’s hair... moves. Like he said, it was long. It goes down to his shoulders. It moves to the side, just a bit. He smiles when it happens, like he’s remembering Isaac... But it’s completely unnatural. Honestly, I found it deeply unsettling. It was not like wind. It was like a hand. Like something was really there.

Up until now, I had mostly found Hermann’s tapes intriguing. They were fascinating little stories, full of never ending questions. But this one, I found disturbing. The story it told was frightening, and the questions it left were upsetting. The week after that interview, I did not sleep well.

(interlude music #2)

NEWT (VO): Edwin’s description of the upside-down smile reminded me of our missing painting. We hadn’t had any developments on that case for a while—but that week, we got a surprising message.

NEWT: Mako, did you see this email?

MAKO: (distant) Which one?

NEWT: In the show inbox. It says it’s from Tomás Hawking.

MAKO: What? Seriously?

(sound of desk chair rolling over closer)

NEWT: Well, it could be a fake.

MAKO: What does he say?

NEWT: (reading) ...Doesn’t sound good. If it’s really him, I think he’s...

MAKO: (also reading) ...not doing so well. No.

NEWT (VO): Here’s what Tomás’s email said.

Dear Newt: I’m on the road. I’m sorry I’ve been hard to reach. The places I’ve been haven’t had reliable internet—and they haven’t been safe. Even now, I’m afraid someone could be listening.
I’m on the trail of the painting. I now firmly believe that Dan had it in his possession when he died, and that he was killed by it. Whoever has it now is in danger. I also believe the painting itself has...

I am traveling to Sicily and then to a monastery. I can’t explain why now. I will reach out when I know more.


MAKO: Yeah.

NEWT: He believes “the painting itself...” is what?

MAKO: And look, he doesn’t say Dan was killed for the painting, he says by the painting.

NEWT: God, what could that even mean?

MAKO: (...)

NEWT: I guess I’ll write him back and ask. We’ll see if he answers.

(interlude music #3)

NEWT (VO): Since our interview with Mr. and Mrs. Leland, a lot of you have been asking what Dr. G had to say, particularly about the missing five days. I also wanted to share with him what Mako had found in Florida. He was not impressed.

HERMANN: So this woman claims she saw Vanessa. In the last ten years.

NEWT: Yes.

HERMANN: (stiffly) Interesting.

NEWT: Sounds like you don’t buy it.

HERMANN: I really have no reason to. It’s her word alone, and she hasn’t seen Va—this woman in many years. It’s more than likely she’d misrecognize. It’s extremely common.

NEWT: So you think she just mistook the photo of Vanessa for this other woman, Alice Sunyaev. The one with the PO box.

HERMANN: What name was that?


HERMANN: (...)

NEWT: Why? Does the name mean something to you?

HERMANN: I believe that was the name of Vanessa’s roommate in college.

NEWT: Oh. Really?

HERMANN: (uncomfortable) I believe so.

NEWT: Do you have her contact info? We’d love to reach out...
HERMANN: No, I don’t. Sorry.

NEWT: Okay. (...) But, so, let’s say Postmistress Smoot isn’t mistaken. Is it possible Vanessa would have opened a PO box in Florida in the mid-90s under a fake name?

HERMANN: Anything is possible, certainly. But it seems unlikely. I’ve no idea why she would have.

NEWT: You can’t think of any reason?

HERMANN: (shortly) No.

NEWT: Okay. (...) Do you mind if I ask about one more thing?

HERMANN: No.

NEWT: It seems like you do. Mind.

HERMANN: Go ahead, Newton.

NEWT: I interviewed Mr. and Mrs. Leland.

HERMANN: (grimly) Did you.

NEWT: They said that after Vanessa went missing, you... also went missing, temporarily. Is it true you disappeared for five days?

HERMANN: ...Yes.

NEWT: What were you doing?

HERMANN: I was looking for my wife.

NEWT: Weren’t the police doing that?

HERMANN: Yes. But it was... insufficient. They didn’t know her. I did.

NEWT: You felt like you had insight they didn’t?

HERMANN: The police put out an APB. They did a cursory search of the highway. That was it.

NEWT: And? You felt like that wasn’t enough?

HERMANN: It wasn’t. They were passive because they thought I did it. They were wasting their time. I had to try, actually try, or nobody else would.

NEWT: ...And?

HERMANN: And nothing. No sign.

(interlude music #3)

NEWT (VO): We had arranged to dig into our next black tape the following week with Dr. G—an exorcism. But before we could start, Mako and I got a call at the studio.

MAKO: Okay. Understood. Yes... Thank you.
MAKO: Newt?

NEWT: What’s up?

MAKO: That was the Westfield Police Department.

NEWT: Hm?

MAKO: Tessa Hall has gone missing.

(outro music begins)

NEWT (VO): Next time: we return to Westfield to assist in the search for Tessa Hall. I’m Newt Geiszler. This is the Black Tapes Podcast.

(outro music fades out)

Chapter End Notes

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smoots
One of the more delightful Boston landmarks, and more delightful MIT hacks; every time I’m reminded of the MIT hacks, I am so very thankful that it’s Newt’s canon alma mater.
VOICEOVER: The Black Tapes is in part an exploration of belief and the search for truth, and in part a profile of the founder of the Gottlieb Institute, professional skeptic Dr. Hermann Gottlieb. Our story is progressing in order, week by week. So, if you’re a first-time listener, welcome to the show! Go start at episode one. Don’t worry. I’ll wait.

(Theme music fades in)

From CTC Studios and the WGBH Podcast Network, welcome to the Black Tapes Podcast. I’m Newt Geiszler.

(Theme music plays: acoustic guitar, church bells, a faraway female voice.)

NEWT: Welcome back. We have a lot to get to this week. We have updates on the search for Vanessa Gottlieb, and more from our wayward drummer, Tomás Hawking. But first, we head back to Western Mass.

(interlude music #1 plays)

NEWT: On Tuesday, a few days before we were due to review another black tape with Dr. Gottlieb, we got a call at the studio.

MAKO: Okay. Understood. Yes... Thank you.

(beep)

MAKO: Newt?

NEWT: What’s up?

MAKO: That was the Westfield Police Department.

NEWT: Hm?

MAKO: Tessa Hall has gone missing.

NEWT (VO): On Monday, Tessa had not returned from school. Her parents went to the police that night. Here was what the police told us.

Monday, around 2:30, she was let out as usual to get on the bus. The monitor says she saw Tessa go into the girls’ room. She didn’t see her come out, so she went in to check. No one was in there.

She assumed Tessa had just snuck past her, so she didn’t tell anyone. The bus left. It stopped at the bottom of the Hall’s street, as usual, and as usual, Lucille was waiting there for her. But she didn’t come out. She wasn’t on the bus.
And she wasn’t in the school when Lucille drove back. She wasn’t on the playground. She wasn’t in the public library. She was nowhere.

Lucille and Laurie were not willing to speak with us. The police told us some of what was going on, but they were not forthcoming. They asked me and Dr. Gottlieb to come down to answer some questions. Mako stayed in Boston digging into the Vanessa Gottlieb case.

*(interlude music #2)*

NEWT (VO): I drove out to Westfield, the same place we had gone on our very first case with Dr. Gottlieb, all those months ago. It felt like a very long time.

I met Dr. Gottlieb in the Sheriff’s office.

SHERIFF: So Mr. Gissler, you interviewed the victim recently?

NEWT: It’s pronounced Geiszler. I met her once, three months ago. I didn’t interview her. I was interviewing her parents.

SHERIFF: You’re a reporter?

NEWT: *(stiff)* That’s right.

SHERIFF: What paper?

NEWT: I work with NPR.

SHERIFF: So this was an NPR piece? For the radio?

NEWT: It’s a podcast.

SHERIFF: A what?

NEWT: ...Radio for the internet.

SHERIFF: So you were interviewing them for your... internet show.

NEWT: *(angry)* That’s right.

SHERIFF: And what sort of questions were you asking her?

NEWT: I told you, I wasn’t asking her questions, I was interviewing her parents—

SHERIFF: *(derisively)* Right. The “moms."

NEWT: Excuse me?

HERMANN: *(cutting him off)* We were speaking with Mrs. and Mrs. Hall about a... stalking they have been experiencing.

SHERIFF: Right, right, I heard about that. The crazy one thinks that “stalker” is what took the girl.

NEWT: *(pissed)* If you—

HERMANN: *(talking over Newt again)* And it sounds as if you aren’t taking these claims seriously?
SHERIFF: Actually, that’s why we brought you nice folks in here. Your show is kind of... dark, isn’t it? The material?

NEWT: (restrained) It’s about the paranormal.

SHERIFF: Well Ms. Hall says you broadcast an interview with her daughter.

NEWT: Sort of.

SHERIFF: Any listeners take a special interest in that episode? Any... stalker types?

NEWT: No.

SHERIFF: Any chance your show could have sent some religious nutjob in Tessa’s direction?

NEWT: (barely restrained) No.

SHERIFF: You don’t sound sure about that.

HERMANN: (crisp) It’s impossible. And ridiculous. The idea that Mr. Geiszler could influence a listener to an act of violence is far-fetched. And illogical. It’s the same logic that blames video games for gun violence. It’s misguided at best—intentionally ignoring the problem at worst.

SHERIFF: So we should be focusing on the shadow man, stalking the Hall kid? Is that your suggestion, Professor?

(phone rings)


(click of phone hanging up)

SHERIFF: Alright. Thanks for your time, fellas.

NEWT: That’s it?

SHERIFF: We’ll be in touch.

(sound of chairs moving, standing up)

HERMANN: Please let us know if we can be of further help. We’ll be staying at the Holiday Inn until Tessa is found.

(Door closing. Sound of two sets of feet walking down a hall, click of Hermann’s cane.)

NEWT: (walking) Can you believe that guy?

HERMANN: Mm.

NEWT: What a [expletive bleeped].

HERMANN: Mm. Much as I may agree, you ought to save your obscenities until we actually leave the precinct...

NEWT: (good-natured) Excuse me, but my obscenities will...

(door opens)
FEMALE VOICE: Dr. Gottlieb.

(beat)

HERMANN: (tense) ...Lightcap.

(beat)

NEWT: Uh... Hi. I’m Newt.

LIGHTCAP: (to Newt) Caitlin Lightcap. (to Hermann) How are you, Hermann?

HERMANN: Fine. Excuse me.

(footsteps and cane clicks)

NEWT: Um. It was nice to meet you.

NEWT (VO): That was Caitlin Lightcap, one of the most noted psychics and parapsychologists in the country. I recognized her once I looked her up.

Here she is in a clip on KQED in 1997, back in the heyday of The X-Files, when she was popular on talk shows. She is demonstrating her abilities to a team at Stanford. They have her hooked up to an EEG, which is a machine that measures brainwave patterns. In the next room, there’s a wooden pinwheel with slices of different colors. The researcher spins the wheel, and it lands on a random color. In the other room, Lightcap guesses which color is on the wheel.

RESEARCHER: Okay Ms. Lightcap. Ready?

LIGHTCAP: Go for it.

(Click-click-click of wheel spinning. Click... click... it stops.)

RESEARCHER: What color do you see?

LIGHTCAP: Orange.

NEWT (VO): Remember, the wheel is in the other room, where Lightcap can’t see it. Another researcher goes back and forth, spinning the wheel after each guess. She got the first one right.

RESEARCHER: Good. Next one.

(wheel spins)

RESEARCHER: What color?

LIGHTCAP: Green.

RESEARCHER: Great.

(wheel spins)

RESEARCHER: And now?
LIGHTCAP: Light blue.

RESEARCHER: Very impressive.

NEWT (VO): The test went on for almost twenty minutes. In total, she got 92% correct.

RESEARCHER: Now?

LIGHTCAP: Yellow.

RESEARCHER: Ms. Lightcap, tell me. Do you see the colors, like you do with your eyes?

LIGHTCAP: Yes.

RESEARCHER: Can you tell me how that’s done?

LIGHTCAP: It’s simple. I’m in the room.

RESEARCHER: You’re in that room?

LIGHTCAP: Yes. I’m standing in front of a wheel, like you’d spin at a fair. But smaller. The size of an umbrella. There’s a small, electronic device to the right. And an intern. He looks bored.

RESEARCHER: Yes. That’s our EMF sensor. And Brendan.

LIGHTCAP: I know.

RESEARCHER: Ms. Lightcap?

LIGHTCAP: Yes.

RESEARCHER: Do you feel yourself physically present in the room? Right now?

LIGHTCAP: Yes. If I concentrate.

RESEARCHER: Could you move anything in there? Don’t strain yourself.

(pause)

(sound of something moving... pinwheel clicks)

RESEARCHER: Oh my god.

NEWT (VO): Yeah. It moved. I was fascinated. I asked Dr. Gottlieb about it later when we met in his motel room to discuss the case.

HERMANN: (flatly) Caitlin Lightcap is a charlatan.

NEWT: (brightly) She seems pretty serious to me.

HERMANN: That’s the trickster’s gift. They ease you into a sense of trust, to distract you from the manipulation. It’s the same misdirection magicians use. In her case, the misdirection is her “serious” manner. She seems like a scientist, not a Madame Blavatsky. But she’s nothing more than a fraud.

NEWT: So she’s faking it?

HERMANN: Yes.
NEWT (VO): Caitlin Lightcap has become a sought-after consultant for detectives and police departments around the country. She specializes in missing persons cases. According to her—and the agencies she assists—she has successfully helped locate almost twenty missing people.

NEWT: So how do you explain her record? She’s found a fair amount of people for a faker.

HERMANN: (sighs) Caitlin Lightcap is actually a gifted detective.

NEWT: What? That’s it? A gifted detective?

HERMANN: Yes. She claims she’s had this “gift” since she was a child. Yet think about when she found success in missing persons cases: the late 90s.

NEWT: So?

HERMANN: The dawn of the age of the internet.

NEWT: So she’s... just using the internet to find people?

HERMANN: Her success coincides exactly with the rise of the information superhighway. Data and personal information being collected and made available at an unprecedented rate. And everyone had access. She finally found the tool to put her skills to use.

NEWT: (hesitant) Well...

HERMANN: What?

NEWT: There was this experiment she did at Stanford...

HERMANN: (chuckles) The colored wheel.

NEWT: Yes!

HERMANN: In the pseudoscientific community, that ability is called “bi-locating.” Supposedly appearing in two places at once.

NEWT: Sure. Okay. So how could she fake that?

HERMANN: Have you heard of the Lightcap Foundation for Higher Learning?

NEWT: No.

HERMANN: It’s her nonprofit organization. It makes a lot of money from celebrity clients.

NEWT: And?

HERMANN: And that foundation funded this experiment at Stanford.

NEWT: Really?

HERMANN: Indirectly, yes. They support the American Institute for Psychic Research, which conducted this experiment.

NEWT: So you think the results are fake, too?

HERMANN: I’d call them unreliable. Let’s say they didn’t monitor their controls as tightly as they
should have.

NEWT: Hmm.

(pause)

NEWT: So you two know each other, then?

HERMANN: In a manner of speaking.

NEWT (VO): Naturally, Lightcap had a book coming out. *Hidden Worlds: Ghost Studies In the 21st Century.* So naturally, she was happy to chat when I got in touch.

I tagged along on day two of her search for Tessa Hall—on the condition that Dr. Gottlieb stay behind. We met up at the Chester-Blandford State Forest, a little ways west of Westfield.

(Sound of feet crunching on gravel, twigs snapping. Trees in the wind, distant bird song.)

NEWT: So you think Tessa might be here? In the forest?

LIGHTCAP: It's a possibility.

NEWT: Can you see her? The way you could see that color wheel?

LIGHTCAP: No. Not exactly.

NEWT (VO): Despite Dr. G’s dismissal, Caitlin Lightcap doesn’t seem like a fraud. And she doesn’t seem like someone who profits off others’ misery. She’s tall—taller than me—with short hair and sleepy eyes. She’s focused, often inside her own head, but when you speak, she listens closely.

NEWT: How do you approach cases like these?

LIGHTCAP: The first thing I do is get a sense of who the victim is—some people might call this their “essence.” I speak with their family, friends, I familiarize myself with their home, possessions, their social media if applicable. I get a sense of the things they value, the things they want.

NEWT: Like a bloodhound.

LIGHTCAP: It’s not dissimilar.

NEWT: A spiritual bloodhound?

LIGHTCAP: (laughs)

NEWT: So once you have the scent, you...?

LIGHTCAP: I focus on their essence and try to locate it.

NEWT: Via visions?

LIGHTCAP: No. It’s more akin to a pull. A gut feeling. I know that sounds unsatisfyingly unscientific. But it’s what I feel. I get in the car, drive east, and I feel her spirit drifting away. I turned around, headed west, and the pull got stronger. I followed it here.
NEWT: Do you have any sense of the... reason she disappeared? Was she taken by someone? Do you have a sense of them?

LIGHTCAP: She was definitely taken. When I was in her room, I felt an extremely dark presence.

NEWT: Her abductor?

LIGHTCAP: Worse.

NEWT: ...What could be worse?

LIGHTCAP: I couldn’t explain it. This presence was not like any of the kidnappers I’ve encountered in the past. It was not the sensation of a sick person. It was more of a presence of... intent. Deliberation. Long-term.

NEWT: So when did you realize you had this gift?

LIGHTCAP: My first memory of it is at age three, but I believe I’ve had it all my life.

NEWT: You can remember things from age three? That’s unusual.

LIGHTCAP: It’s called HSAM. Highly Superior Autobiographical Memory. The human mind has a great deal of storage and processing power. We don’t make use of all of it. Everyone’s mind has this potential.

NEWT: You mean, with the right tools, I could call up memories from when I was three?

LIGHTCAP: With the right mental discipline? Yes. You could recall details from any day of your life.

NEWT: And with the right mental discipline, could I move a color wheel from another room?

LIGHTCAP: (chuckles) Maybe so. It’s my belief that all people have these gifts to varying degrees, like math skills or artistic acuity. Some people are born to do calculus, but most people can learn basic algebra. I was born with this ability.

NEWT: This ability being extreme recall.

LIGHTCAP: Yes. Among other things.

NEWT: Such as bi-locating.

LIGHTCAP: Yes.

NEWT: Can you talk about how that works?

LIGHTCAP: It takes a lot of concentration. Did you know Vladimir Lenin could bi-locate?

NEWT: Really?

LIGHTCAP: Yes. He wasn’t just an economic and philosophical revolutionary. In 1923, he was old and bedridden. He couldn't to move or speak. Yet, while he was in bed being taken care of, there reports of him being seen in his office in Gorky, or reading in his favorite chair, or going through his papers.

NEWT: Wow.
LIGHTCAP: He died soon after. This is all connected. He had unlocked his mind. That gave him abilities from bi-locating, to leading a revolution, to...

NEWT: To potentially locating a missing child?

LIGHTCAP: Let’s hope so.

    NEWT (VO): It didn't escape my notice that Lightcap was aligning herself, however subtly, with that type of genius. But after spending the day with her, I wouldn't begrudge her the title.

Lightcap was a fascinating hiking companion. She was knowledgeable about whole hosts of strange things, flora, fauna, psychology, neurology, history. Whatever I asked, she always had an answer for me.

In a way, she reminded me of Dr. Gottlieb. Like a biazzaro-universe version of him, she had armed her enormous knowledge base and loaded it *with* the paranormal, instead of against it.

And she was thoroughly un-corny. She has a genuine confidence that gives her a natural charisma. Plus that dash of mystery that makes a dream subject for a journalist. I would have called her the real deal. Would have, if Dr. Gottlieb hadn’t been whispering in my ear.

NEWT: Did you know Lenin could bi-locate?

HERMANN: I’ve heard the legend, yes. Did Lightcap tell you that?

NEWT: Yeah. She was interesting. Apparently Aliester Crowley bi-located too.

HERMANN: *(darkly)* I’m sure they would have been friends.

NEWT: You don’t like her, huh?

HERMANN: Who, Lightcap?

NEWT: Obviously.

HERMANN: *(flatly)* I don’t dislike her.

NEWT: *(...)*

*(beat. sounds of typing.)*

NEWT: I’m starving. Want to go get something to eat?

HERMANN: Alright.

*(sound of laptop closing. Newt moves away from mic. Bag unzips.)*

HERMANN: Did you enjoy... your hike?

NEWT: *(distant, looking for something)* Oh yeah. It was lovely. And she was pretty interesting, even for a fraud.

HERMANN: *(uncomfortable)* Mm.
HERMANN: So, are you going to keep recording...?

NEWT: Oh, right.

(zipper, Newt moves back to mic. Loud buzz: someone’s phone is vibrating on the table.)


(beep)

HERMANN: Is something wrong?

NEWT: No. That was the police chief. They found Tessa.

SPONSOR BREAK #1

NEWT (VO): Tessa Hall was found by a hunter and his beagle, in an abandoned cabin near a protected wilderness area. It was about ten miles north of where Lightcap had taken me the day before. The police chief did not have the time or inclination to discuss the case with us; neither did Tessa’s parents.

Poking around, we learned that the cabin had been abandoned for at least eighty years. It’s on private property, but spitting distance from the state-protected forest. We spoke to the property owner, who is in her eighties. She said her kids had found it in disrepair, and made a project of restoring it. This was almost fifty years ago. It’s stood empty and deteriorating since then. No one knew who built it originally. There are no town records of its original ownership or construction.

Tessa was missing for three days. She was found alone. She was healthy, except that she was hungry, and she could not remember how she got from school to the cabin. She said she had no memories of the past three days at all.

After the initial investigation was done, Caitlin Lightcap was given permission to do an onsite reading. They were pretty short on clues about Tessa’s abductor. She agreed to let me join.

(Sound of feet on leaves, twigs snapping.)

NEWT: So do you know Dr. Gottlieb well?

LIGHTCAP: I don’t know if I’d say I know him at all.

NEWT: But you’ve met? You recognized each other... pretty fast.

LIGHTCAP: We’ve met, yes, professionally. He’s debated me at conferences. He never has anything very charitable to say about my work. That used to bother me; now, I don’t let it get to me.

NEWT: It used to bother you?

LIGHTCAP: Of course. When I was first getting started. He’s always there to poke holes in me and my colleagues’ work. It’s a living, I suppose, for him. I spent a lot of time thinking about why he would do it. Now, I don’t really care.
NEWT: Huh.

LIGHTCAP: But I can see why he interests you as a journalist.

NEWT: Oh, yeah. He has a lot to say.

LIGHTCAP: Really? That’s a surprise to hear. I would have thought he was interesting for what he won’t say.

NEWT: ...I guess.

(Beat as they walk. Crunching leaves and twigs. A stream is heard in the distance.)

NEWT: He doesn’t like talking about himself, that’s for sure.

LIGHTCAP: Yet he talks to you.

NEWT: I think he sees it as the price of doing business. If he’s going to get his “message” out... he has to let me package it.

LIGHTCAP: His “message,” huh? Doesn’t that sound more like the language of a prosateur than a skeptic, to you?

NEWT: (chuckle) I guess it does.

(leaves crunch as Lightcap stops walking.)

LIGHTCAP: Here’s what I would do.

NEWT: (stopping, surprised) Yeah?

LIGHTCAP: How many of his black tapes have you seen?

NEWT: Four or five. I know there’s a lot more.

LIGHTCAP: Ask him to watch the Karla tape.

NEWT: The Karla tape?

LIGHTCAP: Yes.

NEWT: What’s on there?

LIGHTCAP: I won’t say more. That’s for Dr. Gottlieb to explain.

   NEWT (VO): We reached the cabin. It was a lot smaller than I expected. It’s on a slope in the woods—mostly hemlocks, not much underbrush—next to a stream. The streambed is steep and deep, almost a gully. It could have been a waterfall, if the stream was running. But it’s barely a trickle.

   The stream forms the border between the private land and the wilderness area. We had to leap across some big rocks to get to the little cabin.

   It was pretty delapidated. Fifty Massachusetts winters will do a number on you. Even I had to duck to get inside. Inside, it was half-rotted and covered in moss, with nails sticking out everywhere. There were two fold-out “cots” made of wood, attached to the
walls with hinges, and a broken table with one stool.

The strangest thing—and the only physical evidence they recovered—was on the walls and ceiling. It was drawings. They were crude, black, sort of like cave drawings. Circles, mostly, with numbers and symbols I didn’t recognize. They gave me the heebie jeebies.

There was a hole in the ceiling, which Lightcap, bending to keep from hitting her head, said was probably the smokestack.

LIGHTCAP: Looks like there was a stove here.

NEWT (VO): She was pointing at the bricks below the hole. There was a pile of ash.

NEWT: Yeah. The owner said her son installed a wood stove when they restored it, but a hunter stole it.

LIGHTCAP: Damn.

NEWT: So, the officer, the one who just let us in, says they found her here around noon. She was just sitting on the stool, not tied up or anything. The door was... well.

NEWT (VO): There was no door on the cabin.

NEWT: ...open. They didn’t find anything except Tessa and the... drawings.

(beat)

NEWT: Caitlin?

NEWT (VO): Caitlin Lightcap was standing in front of the wall, facing away from me. She was looking with her head tilted back, like she was taking in the drawings on the wall and the ceiling. She didn’t say anything. She stood very still.

I went over.

NEWT: Caitlin? What is it? Is everything... Oh my god.

LIGHTCAP: Do you recognize this?

NEWT: Yes. Yes. I saw the same drawing, in Tessa’s bedroom. It was in her closet. She drew it in crayon. This one looks more like charcoal.

LIGHTCAP: No. Tessa Hall did not draw this. And she didn’t draw the one in her closet either.

NEWT: Oh. Who did?

(pause)

NEWT: It kind of looks like it has eyes.

(pause)

NEWT: (hesitantly) Caitlin? Are you good? (...) You’re freaking me out a little.

LIGHTCAP: (quietly) This place is not safe.
NEWT: What?
LIGHTCAP: There is something else here with us.
NEWT: No, it’s just us. What do you mean?
LIGHTCAP: It’s so dark... it’s waited for so long...
NEWT: What is? What’s dark?
LIGHTCAP: It’s him.
NEWT: (agitated) Him who? The face in the drawing? What’s it waiting for?
LIGHTCAP: It’s coming.

SPONSOR BREAK #2

HERMANN: A demon.
NEWT: (excited) Really?
HERMANN: Yes. It looks like someone was trying to summon a demon.

   NEWT (VO): Back at the motel, I was showing Dr. G pictures of the cabin inscriptions.
NEWT: What about this?
HERMANN: This smudge?
NEWT: Doesn’t it look like the one in Tessa’s closet?
HERMANN: Maybe. I think these are more interesting.
NEWT: These numbers and shapes?
HERMANN: Yes. Do you see the overall shape they’re forming?
NEWT: Um... circles?
HERMANN: No, overall. Look.
NEWT: ...I don’t think I see it.
HERMANN: It’s a pentagram.
NEWT: Oh. (...) Oh. Yes. I see it. Oh, sweet.
HERMANN: The face at the center of it? It’s demonic. That face is known in ancient literature as an “elemental.”
NEWT: Never heard of it.
HERMANN: There are several names for it—Asog, Aka Manah. Griogori. It’s an archdemon.
NEWT: Griogori. I’ve heard that before.
HERMANN: Have you?

NEWT: Mm... It'll come back to me. Go on.

HERMANN: Well, whoever kidnapped Tessa has a dangerous obsession with this archdemon. And with sacred geometry.

NEWT: Sacred geometry? The same as the demon board?

HERMANN: Same genre of symbol, yes. Could you send me these photos? I want to send these equations to my friend.

NEWT: Sure.

NEWT (VO): Later, I was lying in bed, trying to fall asleep by not thinking about the case—failing utterly—that was when it came back to me. Griogori. From the mouth of one Ms. Guth, in the Coventry Public Library a few short months ago.

(audio from Episode 4 plays)

GUTH: Father McEwan said later that he never saw anything like it, not before then and not after. [...] He said the demon possessing her was so powerful he did not have the holy words to cast it out. He called it the Griogori.

NEWT (VO): In the morning, I did some cursory research into the mythos of the Griogori. What I found was all highly conflicting. I resolved to ask Dr. G about it in more detail when we got back to Boston.

Before we went home, I wanted one more look at that cabin. And I wanted a fresh set of eyes on it.

(phone ringing)

HERMANN: (muffled through phone) Hello?

NEWT: Hey Hermann.

HERMANN: Oh. Hello.

NEWT: (airily) I was wondering if you were feeling like a little fresh air on this fine Saturday. I was thinking maybe a scenic hike, maybe through the woods...

HERMANN: ...The cabin?

NEWT: The cabin.

(interlude music #2)

(leaves crunching, twigs snapping)

HERMANN: So you said this cabin was built by the property owner’s children?

NEWT: Re-built. They found it. They don’t know who built it originally. Why?

HERMANN: I wondered if it had any other purpose besides, I don’t know. Hunting cabin.
NEWT: Was there a purpose you had in mind?

HERMANN: Not really.

NEWT: (...)

HERMANN: I’ll reserve judgment until we get there. I don’t want to bias you ahead of time.

NEWT: (...)

HERMANN: (sighs) The photos you showed me raised the possibility that this might be... a church.

NEWT: (surprised) A church? All the way out here?

HERMANN: It’s just an idea. The arrangement of the drawings suggested it. But it’s just an idea. We’ll just... see what’s there.

NEWT: (bemused) Okay.

(beat—forest sounds, footsteps)

NEWT: I asked Lightcap about you.

HERMANN: I’m sure you did. She had nothing very charitable to say, I assume?

NEWT: (makes a neutral noise) Not very uncharitable, either. Mostly that you were a mystery.

HERMANN: I’ve been getting that a lot, lately.

NEWT: (chuckles)

(beat)

NEWT: She told me to ask you about a certain tape.

HERMANN: A tape?

NEWT: “Karla.” She said you would know what that meant.

HERMANN: I’m afraid I don’t.

NEWT: You sure?

HERMANN: Quite.

NEWT: Huh. Okay. I think it’s up here. (beat) Yeah, there it is. Oh. We have to cross some rocks. Is that gonna be okay for you?

HERMANN: Is something wrong with the bridge?

NEWT: What bridge?

(beat, as Hermann presumably points)

NEWT: Oh, my god. The cops must have put that up. Lightcap and I did not see that before.

HERMANN: (amused) Some clairvoyant...
(sound of rushing water)

NEWT (VO): In daylight, the cabin looked different. In a way, less creepy; but inside, it was just as dark. Only a bit of sunlight filtered in through the gaps between the logs.

HERMANN: So this is the face?

NEWT: Yeah. It is a face. Don’t try it, Dr. Pareidolia.

HERMANN: (amused) I wasn’t going to. You’re right.

NEWT: Same one as Tessa’s closet.

HERMANN: Maybe.

(footsteps)

HERMANN: This is interesting.

NEWT: What is?

HERMANN: What’s this?

NEWT: The property owner said there used to be a wood stove there. See the smokestack? Someone stole it a while back. There’s still ash.

HERMANN: No. This ash is fresh.

NEWT: What?

HERMANN: I’m no forensics expert. But ash from that stove would have blown away long ago. This is recent.

NEWT: Oh.

HERMANN: And look at this.

NEWT: What?

HERMANN: Do you see how the sun is coming through?

NEWT: Okay.

HERMANN: Now look at the light it’s casting on the wall above these bricks.

NEWT: ...Oh. It’s a cross.

HERMANN: Yes it is. And this is an altar.

NEWT (VO): I saw it. With the sun rising in the east, the light came through a small cross section of cracks in the wall. And on the opposite wall, right above the bricks, clearly by design, the light formed the shape of a cross.

HERMANN: Someone burned something on this altar. Recently.

NEWT: Holy [expletive bleeped].
HERMANN: It’s not polite to swear in church, Newton.

NEWT: *(laughs, but slightly nervously)* Don’t.

HERMANN: And look at this. If this wall is west... then that means this... This is the north wall.

NEWT (VO): He was pointing to the wall with the symbols and the shadowy face. He went to look at it—the face that had put Caitlin Lightcap into a fearful trance.

NEWT: Okay. What does that mean?

HERMANN: It means this is some kind of door.

NEWT: A door?

HERMANN: See, those numbers on that wall?

NEWT: Yes?

HERMANN: Well, I sent the photos you emailed me yesterday to a friend. She said the top lines are reiterations of the Golden Ratio.

NEWT: Uh-huh?

HERMANN: Mathematicians, scholars, and artists have been obsessed with this ratio for years. There are some who believe it is evidence of intelligent design; others believe it has occult properties. This equation, apparently, is folding the Golden Ratio over and over again, onto itself.

NEWT: How is that?

HERMANN: I’m no mathematician. My best guess is... by doing this, in context with the sacred geometry below, here... Someone is trying to create a devil’s door.

NEWT: A what’s that now?

HERMANN: Medieval churches had something they called a “devil’s door” on the north walls of their churches. When they baptized a baby, they opened a small door in the north wall of the church, to allow bad spirits to escape the child.

NEWT: Why would someone create that here? Could they have wanted to baptize Tessa?

HERMANN: *(darkly)* Unlikely. This particular door...

NEWT: This particular devil’s door?

HERMANN: It wasn’t designed to let anything out.

NEWT: No?

HERMANN: No. This is on the south wall, not the north. This was made to let something *in*.

NEWT: ...What sort of something?

HERMANN: Something bad.

*(beat)*
HERMANN: You realize, of course, that none of this is real?

NEWT: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Yeah, of course.

HERMANN: I’ll speak to the police about the ash. They should be able to find out what the kidnapper was burning.

(interlude music #3)

NEWT (VO): Another case, unsolved and open-ended. Was it a church? Who built it? Who brought Tessa there, and why? Was something bad coming, like Lightcap said? Or was it all just runaway mysticism?

I got back to the studio somewhat frustrated. But Mako had news—news about Vanessa.

NEWT: So what did you find?

MAKO: Well, I spoke to the people who were working at the gas station back in 2000. At the time, one of them didn’t have her green card. Her employer protected her, said he was the one working, and she never spoke to the police.

Now, she has her green card. She wasn’t willing to go on tape, but she still remembered that night. Things that are not in the police record.

NEWT: What did she say?

MAKO: So, as we know from Dr. Gottlieb, and the police report, they pulled into the gas station at about 9:50 PM. There was no one else in the lot. The attendant was inside, and she heard shouting. She went to the window, and saw the two of them arguing. Loudly.

NEWT: Oh. Wow.

MAKO: She said Dr. Gottlieb came in to pay, looking pretty upset. She didn’t say anything, and he didn’t either. Then she said he got in the car and left.

NEWT: Without Vanessa?

MAKO: No. The attendant said she didn’t see her—she wasn’t in the parking lot. So either she was in the car, or she disappeared in the 60-second window while he was paying.

NEWT (VO): I was pretty shocked. I don’t know what surprised me—that Dr. Gottlieb had left the argument out of his story? That wasn’t out of character, not really. But something about it was... wrong. I asked him about it next time we spoke in the studio.

HERMANN: (shortly) So what are you asking me? Are you asking me if I left her there? If I lied?

NEWT: No. I’m not saying that. I’m just asking you to tell me what happened.

HERMANN: We had a fight. Yes. When I stopped for gas. If you say the attendant saw it, I guess she must have. I don’t remember her.

We were both very upset. ...Furious. We had been having problems before that, and part of the vacation plan was to work through some things. But we didn’t even get there before we started fighting.
NEWT: Work through things like what?

HERMANN: What?

NEWT: What were you... fighting about?

HERMANN: That’s...

(beat)

HERMANN: My wife was having an affair.

NEWT: (surprised) Oh.

(beat)

HERMANN: (...)

NEWT: So—

HERMANN: (clears throat)

NEWT: With who?

HERMANN: I didn’t know. I still don’t. She wouldn’t say.

NEWT: She wouldn’t say who? Or she wouldn’t say...?

HERMANN: She denied it.

NEWT: Oh.

HERMANN: But it was the only possible explanation for her behavior. The secrecy was systematic. Hotels, motels, secret meetings. “Business trips.”

NEWT: So she... denied it. You argued. And then?

HERMANN: She took her purse and walked away.

NEWT: Away?

HERMANN: Yes. She started walking down the highway. I didn’t follow. I waited. I was angry. Then I went in and paid, got back in the car, and drove slowly down the highway. I expected I would catch up with her. Only about 10 minutes had gone by. (...)

NEWT: But...?

HERMANN: But I didn’t see her. She was gone.

NEWT: So... Vanessa didn’t disappear from a gas station. She disappeared from the highway.

HERMANN: That’s right.

NEWT: (...)

HERMANN: You look upset.
NEWT: *(grim)* I’m not upset you lied about the affair. It’s your personal business, I guess. I am a little disturbed that you let your wife go walk along the highway, alone, at night.

HERMANN: *(quiet)* You think I haven’t regretted that, every day since?

*(silence)*

——————— OFF THE RECORD ———————

NEWT: So like... what does this mean for the investigation?

MAKO: *(considering)* Not much, I don’t think. She still disappeared from, approximately, the same place. The police must have known. And honestly, Newt... it’s not like we’re likely to find something they didn’t.

NEWT: I mean...

MAKO: What we’re looking for is something that has *changed* in the last ten years. If she’s still alive, that’s what we’ll find.

NEWT: And if she’s not...?

MAKO: Then we’ll probably find nothing.

*(pause)*

NEWT: Can you believe she was having an affair?

MAKO: Pretty crazy.

NEWT: Yeah.

MAKO: Still... I mean.

NEWT: *(laughs)* Don’t be mean.

MAKO: I’m just saying. *I* wouldn’t have traded places with her.

NEWT: Harsh!

*(pause)*

NEWT: I can’t believe it, though.

MAKO: As in you can’t, or don’t?

NEWT: Can’t. I guess I believe it. It’s just... weird.

MAKO: Are you upset Gottlieb didn’t tell you?

NEWT: I don’t know. I don’t know. I never know what’s going on with that guy.

MAKO: Don’t stress about it too much, okay? Keep it in the show—leave it on the court. That’s what you say, right?

NEWT: *(laughs)* Yeah. Yeah.
MAKO: I mean, do explore it on the show. That’s the point of investigative journalism. But keep it on the show. That’s where it belongs.

NEWT: Yeah.

——— RESUME RECORD ————

(interlude music #1)

NEWT (VO): Before we go, one last thing. We got another email from Tomás Hawking, our wayward Nephi drummer. This time the body of the email was blank. There was an attachment—a short, fuzzy sound file. I’ll play it for you, but I don’t think you’ll get much more out of it than we did.

(fuzzy, irregular sound is heard, like wind blowing into a cheap microphone. There’s a distant voice, sounding like it’s yelling, but too distant to distinguish any language.)

NEWT (VO): What was Hawking trying to tell us? If anything? Had he found the painting, in Italy, or wherever he really was? Or had he just gone off the deep end?

Either way, the clip was ominous. We emailed him back, but he hasn’t replied.

Next time, in our season finale: a real, live, taped exorcism.

I’m Newt Geiszler. It’s the Black Tapes. Things are not as they seem.

Chapter End Notes

In some chapters, I’ve done my best to invent a more original plot. But “Cabin Fever” is my very favorite Black Tape so I’m afraid I have just re-written it. Adding my girl, Caitlin, in place of smarmy Tannis Braun. I owe Lightcap fully to CWR, of course, whose Lightcap I love and miss every day.
Quarantine Island

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

SEASON 1, EPISODE 7: QUARANTINE ISLAND

PUB 20 DEC 2012

VOICEOVER: The Black Tapes is in part an exploration of belief and the search for truth, and in part a profile of the founder of the Gottlieb Institute, professional skeptic Dr. Hermann Gottlieb. Our story is progressing in order, week by week. So, if you’re a first-time listener, welcome to the show! Go start at episode one. Don’t worry. I’ll wait.

(Familiar theme music fades in)

From CTC Studios and the WGBH Podcast Network, welcome to the Black Tapes Podcast. I’m Newt Geiszler.

(Theme music plays: acoustic guitar, church bells, a faraway female voice.)

NEWT (VO): Welcome back. It feels like I say this every week, but we really have a lot to get through. This is our last episode in season one, and without giving too much away... Well, a lot has happened. We’re going to do our best to make sense of it all.

We started with an exorcism.

(interlude music #1)

So, personally? I love horror movies. That, you could probably already tell, from my choice of podcast subject. The Exorcist is one of my favorites. But what about the rest of America?

A recent poll says 90% of Americans believe in God. (I know, seems surprisingly high to me too.) Of that 90%, 67% believe in demonic possession. A higher proportion believe something supernatural might suddenly take over their body than the proportion who voted for the president. A nation divided indeed.

In 1999, the Catholic Church reported 208 cases of demonic possession in the United States. Last year, they reported 1118. That’s a 450% increase in just 13 years. This increase seemed pretty bizarre to us. After some research, we discovered that the Catholic Church has responded by creating an... unusual new institution. They now have programs for training exorcists. It sounds like something they would have started in 1600, but it’s actually quite recent: in 1999, they opened the Exorcist Society of America.

Before 1999, there were only three Pope-approved exorcists in the U.S. Today, there are 32. Why the sudden rise of alleged demonic possessions?

MALE VOICE: Most people mistakenly believe demonic possession and exorcism are exclusively of the Christian world. They aren’t.

NEWT (VO): This is Father Wilson. He teaches religious studies at BU and is a priest at
FATHER WILSON: All the major religions contain this idea, that the devil can enter and possess a human host. You’ll find it in the texts of Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism.

NEWT: Sure. But the Christian Church is the one that’s built an industry on exorcism. There are private exorcists for hire who make millions.

FATHER WILSON: Not any different than televangelists. These people are charlatans. There have always been those who seek to profit from our weaknesses.

NEWT: Sure. Okay. So how do you explain the rise in actual cases? Cases of demonic possession?

FATHER WILSON: We live in an age where people, more and more, are turning away from the Church. They seek their own path, but without the guidance of the church they fall to temptation and sin in higher numbers than ever before. The work of the devil is to get that foot in the door. He insinuates himself where he sees weakness. And as a people, we are weakening. The path of temptation leads to darkness, the occult, paganism.

NEWT: People have been turning away from the church pretty steadily since the middle of the twentieth century. I don’t think secularism alone explains this specific spike. For example, why didn’t the exorcism boom happen in the 70’s? Paganism and the occult were all over.

FATHER WILSON: That was when psychology was on the rise. Many victims of possession were mistakenly treated as psychology patients.

NEWT: (incredulous) Mistakenly?

FATHER WILSON: Sadly, yes.

NEWT: (clears throat) Tell me, Father, has there been an actual rise in possession cases? Or are there simply more exorcists, due to the new Church programs?

FATHER WILSON: Would there be a need for more exorcists if there weren’t more cases of possession?

MALE VOICE, HEAVY BOSTON ACCENT: So is that what they’re sayin’?

NEWT (VO): I spoke with Dr. Brian Schmidt, a family psychologist in Cambridge. He’s forthright and easygoing, like a sweet uncle—until you get him talking about the Catholic Church.

NEWT: Apparently, cases of possession have jumped over 400% since 1999.

SCHMIDT: No—no. Let me tell you what’s going on. These people are sick. They have an issue that requires professional treatment. If you are “hearing voices,” and your church leaders tell you that may be demonic possession, that is easier—almost more romantic, in a way—to believe than the reality. That you’re sick, and need difficult medical help.

NEWT: Well, the Church invests a lot of resources in training these new exorcists. They seem pretty convinced that it’s working.

SCHMIDT: These people, in my experience, are usually suffering from a form of monomania or
demonomania. And I include the church when I say “these people.”

NEWT: What’s demonomania?

SCHMIDT: When someone is convinced they’re possessed by a demon. Receiving a rite of “exorcism” creates a placebo effect, making it seem for a time, like they’re healed. But it does nothing to treat the underlying psychological condition. Ask the Church if they follow up on these so-called “successful” cases later. I bet they don’t have data on their recidivism rates.

NEWT (VO): Dr. Schmidt was right. They didn’t have any of that data available. We looked.

HERMANN: Newton, I think you’ll find this one intriguing. You expressed some interest in exorcism during the Coventry case, as I recall?

NEWT: (eager) Sure did.

NEWT (VO): Across the river, I sat down with Dr. Gottlieb in his office at the Institute. He queued up a tape—an actual VHS tape, today. The label on it was simply August, 1993.

HERMANN: This is the exorcism of Vera Ruben.

(Exorcism audio plays. We hear a young girl screaming, but not with fear—with fury. The pitch is disturbing. There are sounds of thumps and creaks. Something rattles, maybe a chain. An adult male voice is audible, chanting, but his words are indistinct. Something crashes and breaks.)

NEWT: It really took four guys to hold her down?

HERMANN: Yes.

NEWT: Wow... Jesus.

(screaming continues in background)

NEWT (VO): So... It’s hard to describe what we were seeing. The girl, Vera Ruben, is on the bed in the middle of a room. The room is dark, I can’t really see anything in it but her and the bed. She’s thrashing and screaming. There are four men around the bed... trying to hold her down. Four tall, able-bodied adults. And they’re having a hard time holding down this child.

One man each is on her left leg, right leg, right arm, left arm. They’re putting all their weight on her. It’s barely enough.

(recorded screaming and chanting continue)

NEWT: Damn. This is pretty good. A pretty good fake, I mean. There’s no way this is real.

HERMANN: Just watch.

NEWT: Oh...

(Screaming gets louder. Something smashes.)

NEWT: Holy [expletive bleeped]. Oh my god.
NEWT (VO): Okay, so for a second there, that little girl, on the bed, lifted those four men right off their feet. All four of them. With her arms and legs. Then she did it again.

(Vera Ruben screams get louder, more frantic. Priest chanting gets louder too, words garbled, inaudible. One last drawn-out scream, then we hear a crash. Screaming stops, echoing.)

(silence)

(sound of dripping)

(footsteps)

(pause)

PRIEST: (wearily) The demon is gone. The girl is safe.

(click—tape ends)

NEWT: Good god. That was crazy.

HERMANN: Convincing?

NEWT: Disturbingly. Especially those sounds. (...) But, well. I guess they added those in post. And the special effects with the bed? It’s pretty well done.

HERMANN: (frankly) The girl was making those sounds.


HERMANN: (slight laugh) No, no. It wasn’t edited.

NEWT: Hermann! How can you say that? Are you feeling well? Are you good? Hello? There’s no way you believe that was real.

HERMANN: It wasn’t real. I’m saying it wasn’t edited.

NEWT: Hermann! How can you say that? Are you feeling well? Are you good? Hello? There’s no way you believe that was real.

HERMANN: It wasn’t real. I’m saying it wasn’t edited.

NEWT: And how do you know that?

HERMANN: ...Because I was the one filming it.

NEWT: (shocked) It—you? You were there?

HERMANN: I was behind the camera. I saw the whole thing from about seven feet away.

NEWT: Good god! But the whole thing was so...

HERMANN: (grimly) ...Convincing. I know. As soon as it got underway, I wished I had set up additional equipment.

NEWT: So...?

HERMANN: So?

NEWT: Do you think it might have been a real possession?

HERMANN: No. I do not. (sighs)
This was in 1993. I had just begun the Institute when I met Father Dirac. He’s the priest performing the exorcism in this video. I shadowed him on several exorcisms around New England; mostly, they were nonsense. These were people who needed psychological help. But this one was... different.

NEWT: How so?

HERMANN: To this day, I don’t know how they did it. As you saw, it was elaborate. But I wasn’t allowed to look around the bunker. I was hurried out and off the island before I had a chance to examine the room...

NEWT: Hang on, hang on. Island? What island?

HERMANN: This exorcism took place on Rainsford Island, in Boston Harbor.

NEWT: Oh. Okay. Um... Why?

HERMANN: I was given to understand it had some significance to the family. Some connection to the building, Stone Hospital. It was disused by that point. Sort of a crumbling Greek-revival by the ocean.

NEWT: Doesn’t sound extremely dramatic and creepy at all.

HERMANN: (sighing) It was certainly quite an atmosphere. They brought Father Dirac and I down to the basement, and then through a concrete tunnel, into this bunker.

NEWT: This didn’t seem strange to you?

HERMANN: The whole experience was strange.

NEWT: Mm.

(interlude music #2)

NEWT (VO): So what was it like, a church-sanctioned exorcism? I wanted to speak to someone who had experienced one.

YOUNG MAN’S VOICE: It happened when I was 16.

NEWT (VO): This is David. He asked that we only use his first name. A few years ago, he says, he was possessed by a demon.

NEWT: Can you tell us how it happened?

DAVID: Well, it started out pretty normal. I went over my buddy Jake’s house on a regular friday. He was having a bonfire. There were other kids there, and this one girl I didn’t know, she had a ouija board. We sat around the picnic table and played it.

NEWT: (attentive) You think the demon came from the board?

DAVID: Well...

NEWT: Do you—um, was the board black?

DAVID: No. It was just paper. I think the girl made it herself. I forget her name.

NEWT: Oh. Go on. What happened?
DAVID: Well we were talking with the ghost, asking like how it died, and where. Then the girl asked why it was talking to us, and the thing on the board went nuts and flew off. It landed in my lap. I was [expletive bleeped] terrified.

NEWT: So you think that ghost came out and possessed you?

DAVID: I don’t know. When I told the priest about this, he said I had left my mind open to something dangerous.

NEWT: The priest said that.

DAVID: Uh-huh.

NEWT: How long were you possessed?

DAVID: Eight months.

NEWT: Can you describe the experience?

DAVID: I don’t remember it very clearly. It’s hazy, like there’s a cloud over it. Almost like a dream.

NEWT: ...Have you ever been treated for depression, David?

DAVID: No. I’ve never been depressed.

NEWT: Do you remember the exorcism?

DAVID: ...No.

NEWT: How did it feel when you were... um, freed?

DAVID: Relieved. I felt happy again. Like that cloud had been lifted.

NEWT: And who was it who suggested you were possessed?

DAVID: It was my priest who finally figured it out. I’m on a much healthier path now.

(interlude music #1)

NEWT (VO): So as it turned out, Dr. Gottlieb’s friend Father Dirac was still around. He’s in his late 70s, living in a care home run by the Church in the Boston area. He agreed to speak with us about the exorcism.

Before we went, I did a bit of research into the island. There wasn’t much. Rainsford Island, known at other times as Quarantine Island or Pest House Island, is a tiny island in the protected Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area. In its time, it has served as farmland, veterans hospital, reform school, resort, quarantine hospital, and unmarked burial ground for criminals and the diseased. No ferries run to the island—it’s only accessible by private boat, and by the countless ghosts that surely haunt the hell out of it.

Mako got to work finding us someone with a boat who was willing to sail in early December. In the meantime, Dr. Gottlieb and I went to visit Father Dirac.

NEWT: So you worked with Father Dirac for a while?
HERMANN: A year or two. He let me videotape the exorcisms as part of my research, as long as I didn’t release the tapes to the public.

NEWT: Huh.

HERMANN: But the exorcism of Vera Ruben changed things. For both of us. The Bishop of the Archdiocese tried to seize the tape from me, though of course he had no legal grounds. When I wouldn’t hand it over, the pressure fell on Father Dirac. He had to ‘let me go,’ so to speak. He didn’t hold it against me. He was too busy falling into his own crusade.

NEWT: How do you mean?

HERMANN: As it turned out, this was his second time trying to exorcise Vera Ruben. At some point, it became personal for Father Dirac. He actually performed three more exorcisms on her over the next few years.

NEWT: Wow. Do you know why?

HERMANN: I never understood, really. I believe he thought God’s mission for him was to rid the world of this specific demon.

NEWT: Oh. Will he want to talk about it, after all this time?

HERMANN: (darkly) He likes talking about it.

NEWT (VO): We sat down with Father Dirac in his room at the care home. He’s pretty spry for a 70-year-old guy. But Dr. G was right. He did like talking about it.

NEWT: So, I saw the tape of Vera Ruben’s exorcism.

FATHER DIRAC: (elderly, slight Boston accent) You kept it, Hermann?

HERMANN: Of course.

FATHER DIRAC: (to Newt) Are you a believer, my son?

NEWT: Call me... agnostic.

HERMANN: (quiet laugh)

FATHER DIRAC: You watch out for this one. Hermann’s the skeptic extraordinaire. He can make you disbelieve anything. He’ll talk the moon right out of the sky.

NEWT: (laughs) He’ll sure try.

FATHER DIRAC: (chuckles)

NEWT: It was uh... sure something. That tape.

FATHER DIRAC: It certainly was, my son. That wasn’t the last time I came face-to-face with that demon.

NEWT: No, Dr. G told me you performed a few more exorcisms on the same girl...

(chair creaks)
FATHER DIRAC: *(voice low)* Not just her. There was another.

HERMANN: There was someone else?

FATHER DIRAC: We must be careful, and stay vigilant. He is everywhere. And he is watching.

NEWT: Who is?

HERMANN: Did anyone film that exorcism?

FATHER DIRAC: *(confidential)* He is...

HERMANN: *(pressing)* Father Dirac, when was the second case?

FATHER DIRAC: They wait, and they watch. They know when you’re looking for them... and they know when you’re at your weakest. They'll take advantage. They don’t want to be found.

NEWT: What do you mean?

FATHER DIRAC: The watchers. And this watcher is special. He is crueller. Not as cruel as Satan, but it is he whom he serves.

NEWT: Who does?

HERMANN: Are you talking about the elemental?

NEWT: What’s that? I think I’ve heard you mention it.

HERMANN: It’s a myth.

FATHER DIRAC: It’s no myth. It’s watching.

    NEWT (VO): Father Dirac’s demon sounded eerily familiar. More on that, and a trip on the high seas, after the break. But first, we had some listener mail. Stay with us after the break.

    SPONSOR BREAK #1

MAKO: So, as you know, we get a lot of messages from listeners.

NEWT: We sure do. *(to the mic)* You guys are freaks! We love it.

MAKO: *(laughs)* Right. Well, a lot are tips. Some of them are a bit out-there.

NEWT: Such as?

MAKO: Well, lately we’ve been getting messages from someone named George Smith. A lot of messages.

NEWT: Doesn’t sound like a fake name at all.

MAKO: Mm. Well he claims he’s an old friend of Justin McCall.

NEWT: Interesting. Justin McCall was Gottlieb’s old intern, right? The one who was
obsessed with *Il Sorriso Capovolto*?

MAKO: That’s right.

NEWT: He died in a car accident.

MAKO: Well, Mr. Smith says he has information about his death. Information that apparently pertains to Dr. Gottlieb.

NEWT: Really?

MAKO: *(grimly)* Really. He wants to meet with you and Dr. Gottlieb.

NEWT: Huh. I guess we should check it out.

MAKO: *(reluctantly)* Yes, well, I set up a meeting. It’s in a public place.

NEWT: Alright.

MAKO: And I’ll frisk him before he goes in.

NEWT: *(laughs)* Always looking out for me, Mako.

MAKO: Someone has to.

*(interlude music #1)*

*(interior café sounds—talking, clinking cups, street outside)*

HERMANN: I don’t think Mr. Smith is coming.

NEWT: Maybe.

HERMANN: He’s almost an hour late. Why are you still recording?

NEWT: Just in case. Let’s give him, like, five more minutes.

HERMANN: As you wish. *(pause)* Do you... have plans for the weekend?

NEWT: Me?

HERMANN: Who else would I be talking to?

NEWT: Sorry, just. Coming out of left field, from you.

HERMANN: Are you unfamiliar with the concept of small talk?

NEWT: I didn’t think you were familiar with it. *(laughs)* I’m probably just working. You know me. Might go see the new *Hobbit*.

HERMANN: *(disdainfully)* Why?

NEWT: *(laughs)* Not a Peter Jackson fan?

HERMANN: I have *some* standards. If—

*(loud buzz—phone vibrating)*
HERMANN: ...This is my office. Excuse me.

NEWT: Mhm.

(sound of chair as Hermann gets up, leaves table)

(cafésounds continue)

(Newtwhistlesabsently)

(sound of chair)

NEWT: Uh. Someone’s sitting there.

MALE VOICE: (deep) Are they?

NEWT: ...Yes. (pause) Um, do I know you?

MAN: Maybe. Are you Newton Geiszler?

NEWT: Maybe. Are you... Are you George Smith?

MAN: ...Not what you were expecting?

NEWT: Not when I was expecting. You’re almost an hour late, dude.

MAN: I’m sorry. I’m here now.

NEWT: Well.

NEWT (VO): He was tall. He was wearing a suit. His hair was carefully coiffed, and his voice... well, you can hear it. And. What I’m... What I’m trying to say is—this guy was extremely handsome. Like, really good looking. Like if Thor started going to Cary Grant’s hairdresser and also stole George Clooney’s eyebrows. This dude was unreal.

Not what I was expecting indeed.

MAN: So you’re here with Dr. Gottlieb.

NEWT: Per your request, yes. He’s right out front, with my producer. You must have walked right by them.

(beat)

NEWT: So what was it you wanted to tell us about Justin McCall?

MAN: Your little show has a lot of listeners, doesn’t it, Newton?

NEWT: (uncertainly) Well, I like to think so.

MAN: I’d mind what you share with them. People are more pliable than we realize.

NEWT: What’s that supposed to mean?

(chair moves)

NEWT: Hey, what are you doing with that?
MAN: Goodbye, Newton. Pleased to finally meet you.

NEWT: Hey!

(footsteps)

(other footsteps)

MAKO: Hey—is everything okay?

NEWT: Yeah, um, you guys just missed George. And let me just say, he was not what I was expecting.

HERMANN: What?

MAKO: Really?

NEWT: Yeah. He just left.

HERMANN: That’s impossible.

NEWT: Improbable, maybe, but it’s true. He sat down, said some weirdly cryptic stuff, and then he—uh?—stole your coffee, Dr. G, and walked out.

HERMANN: No. Newton. I just got off the phone with my office. George Smith is sitting in my waiting room. Someone called and told him to come see me. He’s never heard of The Black Tapes Podcast.

NEWT: What? Seriously?

HERMANN: It’s true. I just got off the phone with him.

NEWT: But... I thought it was him... (uncertain) Come to think of it, I don’t think he said his name was George.

NEWT (VO): Mako pulled up a picture of the real George Smith on her phone.

NEWT: (laughs) Oh! Yeah, no.

MAKO: Not him?

NEWT: No, no. Definitely not. The guy who talked to me can only be described as like... outrageously hot.

HERMANN: Only?

NEWT: Seriously. This looks like nerdy Quentin Tarantino. My guy was like sexy Danny Ocean. But scary. Scary, sexy Danny Ocean.

HERMANN: Hmm.

MAKO: So what did Evil Danny Ocean say?

NEWT: Not evil. Scary-Sexy. He didn’t say much, but I got it all on tape.

MAKO: And he... took Dr. G’s coffee cup?
NEWT: Yeah. Took it and walked out. It was bizarre.

NEWT (VO): We still have yet to identify this coffee-stealing impostor. In the meantime, Mako found us a seaworthy vessel and a captain. That weekend, we took a trip out on the harbor on The Lady of Shalott.

(interlude music #1)

As most of the ship captains and boat owners and Coast Guard officers we contacted told us, December is a pretty suboptimal time to take a boat into the Harbor. They weren’t lying. It was a turbulent, bone-cold journey from Hull to Rainsford Island. The harbor did not want us out there. Our captain, unseasonably chipper, spent much of the trip telling us how they had built the boat themself.

But we made it to the island in one cold, wet piece. Mother Nature works hard, but the WGBH Podcast Network works harder.

When Dr. G set the scene, I had pictured a sort of Shutter Island type of deal. But his last visit was almost 20 years ago. The sea and the wind had done a lot of reclamation in that time. Greek-revival the abandoned hospital might once have been; now it was barely a shell. We walked up the rocky slope, over the frozen rise, and up to the hospital.

(sound of waves, howling wind)

NEWT: (loudly, over wind) You weren’t kidding about the atmosphere.

HERMANN: (loudly) No.

NEWT: This thing is barely a skeleton.

HERMANN: In your estimation, does that make it more, or less haunted?

NEWT: (laughs)

HERMANN: Honestly, Newton, I’m not sure what you expect to find here.

NEWT: I’m not sure either. But we came a long way to find it. Let’s find that bunker.

NEWT (VO): Dr. G had a pretty good memory of the layout of the hospital, and was able to find the steps down to the pit that used to be the cellar. The cellar was full of debris, but with some luck, we found the bulkhead. It didn't look like anyone had opened it since 1993.

But it wasn’t locked.

(wind, distant waves)

NEWT: After you?

HERMANN: I insist.

NEWT: Smart. Whatever’s in there will eat me first.

(loud, metallic creak as Newt opens door)
HERMANN: You know what they say.

NEWT: *(voice echoing inside the tunnel entrance)* What do they say?

HERMANN: Women, children, and journalists first.

NEWT: *(laughs—it echoes in the tunnel)* Come on in. The water—and by water I mean completely frozen, completely creepy tunnel—is fine.

*(Wind fades. Two pairs of footsteps plus cane clicks echo down a narrow concrete hallway. Sound of water dripping in the distance.)*

NEWT: *(hushed)* Is it far?

HERMANN: Not as I recall. There—that should be the door.

NEWT: Sweet. It's unlocked.

*(sound of metal handle, creaking door)*

*(footsteps echo wider as they step into a larger space)*

NEWT: ...Whoa.

NEWT (VO): The door at the end of the hallway opened into a long, dimly lit room. It had barred windows near the ceiling, where some light filtered in, along with the rain and snow from outside. The floor was wet—in some places the puddles looked a few inches deep. It was empty now, but it looked like it might have been used for storage, originally.

But there was something else. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust, but when they did...

*(Drip, drip, drip of water. Wind howling outside.)*

NEWT: *(quietly, but echoing)* Hermann?

HERMANN: Yes?

NEWT: What are those symbols?

NEWT (VO): I pointed my flashlight at the far wall. It barely reached. Neither of us had stepped out of the doorway. There was something that kept us from crossing that threshold.

HERMANN: What sym... oh.

NEWT: Yeah. Do those look familiar to you?

HERMANN: They weren’t here in 1993, if that’s what you’re asking.

NEWT: No, no. I mean, do they look like the ones from the cabin?

HERMANN: ...I’d have to take a closer look.

*(Hermann starts walking)*
NEWT: (whispering) Hermann!

(annoyed sound from Newt, then footsteps as he hurries after Hermann)

NEWT: This bunker doesn’t freak you out?

(sound of their footsteps through shallow water, echoing)

HERMANN: There’s nothing to be nervous about. Not a soul has set foot in this building in decades.

NEWT: Somehow, not reassuring.

HERMANN: Strange. I seem to remember a horror movie buff who was profiling me for the past six months. What ever happened to him?

NEWT: Sure, I like watching them. But do I look like I would survive one?

HERMANN: (laughs)

(footsteps stop)

(beat)

NEWT: So? Are the symbols the same?

HERMANN: May I? Thank you. (...) No. These symbols and shapes contain some sacred geometry. But there are unrelated symbols as well. For example, this is the sign of Tiamat.

NEWT: That wasn’t in the cabin?

HERMANN: Not as I recall.

NEWT: What about that?

HERMANN: Which?

NEWT: That. Isn’t that the same symbol from the cabin, and the demon board? Pentagram, double circle?

HERMANN: Yes... so it is.

NEWT: What does it represent?

HERMANN: I’m not exactly certain. I’ll have to look into it.

NEWT (VO): I took some pictures, which Dr. G promised to send to his mathematical friend for a second opinion. Then we left the bunker and rode the boat back to the mainland.

It was a pretty fascinating visit. Compared with everywhere we’d been so far, that island was by far the most hauntable. Even though it was freaky—that tunnel especially—I was into it. But I didn’t know what I’d do if the tapes keep ratcheting up the haunt factor. I wasn’t sure how much higher I could go.

I wiped away tears from the frigid wind and watched Rainsford Island get smaller and
smaller on the horizon. As we got farther, I felt a weird tension in ease in my stomach. I hadn’t even known it was there. There was something about that place, alright.

I looked over at Hermann. He was up at the bow, looking at the horizon—trying to keep from getting seasick, I think. He looked troubled. When I looked back at the horizon where the island had been, it was gone.

(interlude music #3)

NEWT (VO): The island visit gave me a lot to think about. Mako and I couldn’t find any reliable historical documentation that explained why an exorcism would have taken place there. So we turned to an earlier source.

NEWT: Hello Father? It’s Newt Geiszler from the radio show.

FATHER DIRAC: (muffled through phone) Oh, Hermann’s friend. Good to hear from you, son.

NEWT (VO): I called Father Dirac at the care home. He was kind enough to chat.

NEWT: So we went to the island. We visited the bunker where you performed the exorcism of Vera Ruben.

FATHER DIRAC: Oh, yes. Of course.

NEWT: Well, the walls were covered with symbols. Hermann said they were sacred geometry. Some of them looked pretty satanic. Do you know anything about those?

FATHER DIRAC: Well, I’d have to see them for myself to really be sure...

NEWT: So they weren’t there when you performed your exorcism?

FATHER DIRAC: No, no.

NEWT: There was a pentagram with a double circle around it. Are you familiar with that symbol? Hermann also mentioned something called the sign of Tiamat. Plus the sacred geometry—they’re equations, as I understand them.

FATHER DIRAC: Ah.

NEWT: Do you have any idea why someone would draw these?

FATHER DIRAC: The end of days, of course.

NEWT: Uh—sorry?

FATHER DIRAC: I’d have to see them to be sure, of course. But from your description, it sounds like a ceremony to bring on the end of days.

NEWT: Oh. Father, you say it so matter-of-factly!

FATHER DIRAC: Yes, I’m familiar with this ritual. Nothing more than a myth, of course. Quite apocryphal. Have you heard of the Ceonophus?
NEWT: No, I haven’t. What’s the Ceonophus?

FATHER DIRAC: It’s a book. A book of incantations. It’s a bastardized Bible... You see, in the first millennium, most people were convinced the end of days was coming in the year 1000. The rumblings of apocalypse were all around. Everyone prepared for judgment day. Then the year 1000 passed... and nothing happened. Then they waited for 1033, the millennium of the death of Christ. Still nothing. The world went on. The Antichrist did not appear.

Some people had staked a lot on that. Not for the right reasons. Some were waiting... Even after others moved on. It’s around this time the Ceonophus was written.

NEWT: That’s fascinating. What sort of incantations did that book have?

FATHER DIRAC: Supplications.

NEWT: Sorry?

FATHER DIRAC: Invocations. Appeals to the elemental, to come to the speaker.

NEWT: The elemental. You mentioned that before. What is that?

FATHER DIRAC: A very ancient demon. I’ve encountered it myself. You saw the tape.

NEWT: That was it?

FATHER DIRAC: Yes. The Griogori.

NEWT: The Griogori...

   NEWT (VO) There it was—that name again. I suddenly felt something coming. Like the Father was, without knowing it, nocking an arrow and drawing the string.

FATHER DIRAC: Yes. It’s like I told you, son. He is watching.

NEWT: Can—(clears throat) Can you tell me why you performed this exorcism in that bunker? Instead of in a church?

FATHER DIRAC: It was a church.

NEWT: (startled) Pardon?

FATHER DIRAC: That’s no bunker. That’s a church.

NEWT: (agitated) We—we researched out the building records on that island. There’s no record of anyone building a church.

FATHER DIRAC: My son, there are many types of worship.

   (interlude music #1)

   NEWT (VO): I arranged to bring the Father the photos we took in the bunker. I was supposed to visit him at the care home the next day. When I arrived at the home, I was informed that Father Dirac had been moved. The administration said it was a matter of privacy. They would not give me his new address.

   The Catholic Church runs the home where he lived. Did they whisk him away so he
couldn’t talk to us? If so, why?

When the Father said that bunker was a church... Something clicked. It was like—it was like I was a bear wandering through the woods, hunting and scavenging for food. Suddenly, I looked down and my foot was in a trap. For a second I didn’t know what was coming. I just knew something was coming. And then it snapped shut.

How could I have not seen it?

I asked Dr. Gottlieb to meet me at the studio. I played him the phone interview with Father Dirac.

NEWT: So?

HERMANN: Yes?

NEWT: You don’t think that’s... interesting?

HERMANN: I think it’s interesting that he was so suddenly moved. The Church may be trying to suppress something that he knows. I wonder if they overheard us talking about the other exorcism.

NEWT: Okay—yeah. Maybe. But what about what he actually said? He said the bunker was a church. Like the cabin.

HERMANN: I’m not sure what to make of that. I don’t really see why you’re accepting the testimony of an old, unstable man at face value.

NEWT: (pause) Okay, but...

HERMANN: Additionally, Newton, I did not say that cabin was a church. I said it might have been, or that it was being used as one by Tessa Hall’s abductor.

NEWT: (...) 

HERMANN: What was it you found so interesting?

NEWT: The Griogori. Doesn’t that sound familiar?

HERMANN: The same as the demon supposedly possessing Zilpha Foster. Yes.

NEWT: And in the cabin, you said the shadowy shape was the Griogori.

HERMANN: I said it could have been.

NEWT: Hermann.

HERMANN: What?

NEWT: (slowly) I have to ask... Your black tapes. They aren’t just an arbitrary collection of unsolvable videos.

HERMANN: (...) 

NEWT: Hermann... are the black tapes all connected?

HERMANN: (...)
NEWT (VO): I finally, suddenly felt like I was seeing the big picture I hadn’t even known was there. It was exhilarating. And terrifying. Was everything, somehow, impossibly connected? Did Dr. Gottlieb know?

NEWT: Hermann. Are they?

HERMANN: ...What makes you suggest that?

NEWT: Um, like, everything? Is it not obvious? The Griogori possessing several people over a hundred years? The pentagram in the double circle, appearing in the bunker and the cabin and the demon board? The demon from the experiment having an upside-down face like the one in the painting? The shadow following the Halls? How could you not see it?

HERMANN: (exasperated) Newton...

NEWT: What?!

HERMANN: Let’s isolate each of these “connections,” as you call them. An upside-down face is something that naturally horrifies us. It’s viscerally upsetting. It’s natural that such a nightmare image would recur. And a gap of 700 years hardly makes for a coincidence.

NEWT: (...)

HERMANN: As for that symbol, I am still looking into it. It is a satanic symbol; its history is unclear to me, as yet. But we have no evidence it represents one particular organization or interest.

NEWT: (tightly) What about the Griogori?

HERMANN: Newton. Even if it were not coincidence, where would that leave us? Let’s say there is some group, say, a doomsday cult, actively seeking to bring this particular demon into the world. Perhaps their symbol is this concentric-circle-pentagram. What does that give us? Nothing. Proof of nothing. Their efforts will be futile. Because there is no such thing as demons.

NEWT: (...)

HERMANN: (...)

NEWT: I think you’re avoiding the question, Hermann.

HERMANN: What question? I’ve just answered it. The connections are spurious. Your mind is seeking a pattern where there isn’t one.

NEWT: (with irony) ...Pareidolia?

HERMANN: (matching irony) As you say. (...) Honestly, Newton. I appreciate your open-mindedness, as a journalist. But it is possible to be too open. Your skepticism is one of your most valuable critical tools. Keep it sharp.

NEWT: ...I don’t know.

HERMANN: About?

NEWT: I think I have a sharp skepticism. It’s just pointed in a direction you don’t approve of.

HERMANN: Which is?
NEWT: Towards you.

HERMANN: ...You don’t believe me.

NEWT: I think you’re dodging my question. Are the black tapes connected?

HERMANN: (clears throat) No.

(tense pause)

HERMANN: (curtly) Is there something else you’d like to ask, Newton?

NEWT: (frustrated) Don’t you trust me, Hermann? After all this time?

HERMANN: No—it isn’t that.

NEWT: Then what? What do I have to—

(knocking on door)

MAKO: (muffled) Newt? Dr. Gottlieb?

NEWT: (loudly) Yeah?

(door opens)

MAKO: I’m sorry to barge in. I just got a call from Ms. Smoot at the post office in Florida. She—well, she saw Vanessa.

NEWT: What?

HERMANN: (...)

MAKO: She said she came in and got her mail—I’ll play you the message, hold on—


MAKO: ...Dr. G? Are you...?

HERMANN: (low) Excuse me.

NEWT: Hermann?

(sound of chair moving, someone hurrying out of the room)

NEWT: Wait! Hermann, wait! Hey!

(sound of chair, Newt scrambling after)

(door closes)

——————— OFF THE RECORD ———————

(running footsteps, echoing down a hallway)

NEWT: Hermann! Wait!
(second pair of footsteps, hurried, with cane clicks)
(all footsteps stop)
(sound of a door handle, then a thump)
NEWT: (breathless) Hang on. Please.
HERMANN: (also breathless) Newton, let go of the door.
NEWT: Where are you going?
HERMANN: (voice low) Where do you think? I’m going to find my wife.
NEWT: (still breathless) You seriously—think you can just—answer none of my questions—and then run off? And not expect me to—?
HERMANN: Newton, please. I have to go.
NEWT: Hermann!
HERMANN: (...)
NEWT: (...)
HERMANN: (more gently) What? What is it?
NEWT: (quietly) I don’t know. I just have the—the feeling that once you walk out this door I’m not going to see you again. At least not until you—until you find Vanessa.
HERMANN: (pause) Newton...
NEWT: Please, just tell me one th—
(Newt breaks off)
(muffled, unclear noise)
(sound of inhale)
(thump)
(squeak of shoe)
(soft gasp)
HERMANN: (murmur) Goodbye, Newton.
(door opens)
NEWT: Wh...
(footsteps with cane recede)
(door slams shut)
(Newt exhales loudly)
NEWT: (whisper) Oh, god.

------------- RESUME RECORD -------------

NEWT (VO): And just like that, he was gone.

(interlude music #3)

But that wasn’t the last surprise waiting for us.

MAKO: I know you’re worried, but you can’t do anything at this point.

NEWT: I know.

MAKO: We just have to wait, Newt.

(knock on door)

MAKO: Come in! (door opens) Oh, hey, Shelby. What’s up?

SHELBY: There’s a delivery guy out here. He, like, really wants a signature.

MAKO: You can sign, Shelby. It’s just a proof of receipt.

SHELBY: No... The package is for you guys. He said it had to be one of you. He’s, uh. Insisting.

MAKO: Okay. I’ll be right there.

(sound of Mako standing up, walking out)

(doors closes)

(pause)

(doors opens)

NEWT: What did you get?

MAKO: (slowly) Don’t know. I don’t remember ordering a... tube.

NEWT: (sharply) A what?

MAKO: Yeah...

NEWT: Who delivered it? Is he still out there?

MAKO: I don’t know—

NEWT: (yelling) Shelby! Don’t let that guy go!

(thumping footsteps as Newt runs out of the room)

(doors slams)

(silence)

(...)


NEWT (VO): I wasn’t able to catch the delivery guy. We got a picture of him on the CCTV, but it’s blurry. He isn’t in uniform. Before you ask, no—it wasn’t Sexy George Clooney from the café.

(_outro music begins)


Are the black tape cases all connected?

Who sent us that package? What was in it?

...Was it a painting?

(_outro music continues)

It was a painting. You’ll have to wait for our next episode to find out which.

We’ll answer that, and, lord willing, the rest of these questions, in our next season. Stay tuned to the feed. We’ll have more updates as soon as we possibly can.

Trust me—as badly as these questions are tearing you up, it’s 20 times worse on this end. They keep me up at night. I swear to you, we are doing our best to find the truth.

You’ll just have to trust us a little longer.

This is the Black Tapes Podcast, and this is Newt Geiszler, signing off. See you next season.

(music fades out)

Chapter End Notes

_Seaon 2 Playlist_
Hey y'all welcome back! I'm really sorry this is a few days late, finals are kicking my ass and I completely forgot to post!

If you are interested in some additional angst, hit that season 2 mix.

The whole city slogged through March on the promise of spring. Newt nearly didn’t make it to April.

April was the dawn of new life—green shoots in the cold mud, sunlight that actually meant something. Everything was waking up, except for the leaves, which would make you wait for it, and then burst out all at once in early May.

Everything was waking up, except him.

No, not Newt. Because he hadn’t slept.

He’d been wide awake all winter.

This bout of insomnia was not his first. But sometime in January he realized this one was different. He was keeping busy—in between Black Tapes seasons, the station had hired him as a producer on BPR. This kept him working weekdays, even if the work was dull and his coworkers wary of him. And Mako insisted she still needed him as her producer on Stranger Danger. For that, he was silently grateful. It kept him busy and in touch with her, the only person who knew. And he needed someone who knew.

Frankly, all in all, he was keeping it together exceptionally well for someone with such raging insomnia. Exceptionally well, he thought, staring into the utter blackness of the space where his ceiling probably was.

Tonight he had blacked out his windows with a wool blanket like it was Blitz-era London and done the same to his doorframe. The room was absolutely black. Worth a try, right? Do-it-yourself sensory deprivation. Yet his senses were awake, alive, charged like a defibrillator.

Where was he?

Four months. Not a word. And not an hour had gone by that Newt didn’t wonder.

Goodbye, Newton...

Not a word. What would they do if Hermann never answered? For months, between their other jobs, they tracked leads down dead-end threads and spun theories out of insubstantial wisps. They were out of ideas. And nearly out of time.

There were a million mysteries to keep Newt awake, and Hermann was the knot at the center of the snarl. He was the hole in the needle in the haystack. The ghost who vanished when you looked right at it; the ghost who kissed you to shut you up, and then vanished.
Goodbye, Newton...

Why had he done it? Ever since that moment, Newt had been beset by images and imaginings he had never permitted himself. Whatever he had felt for Hermann, all those months, he had kept presentable to everyone. Including himself. But from that moment forward it was irresistible truth.

Newton...

Oh, God. Once Newt’s heart had stopped trying to pound out of his ribs every time he thought about it, noxious shame descended. Never in his career had he been so unprofessional. And never had he expected Hermann of all people—professor of propriety, doctor of decorum Hermann Gottlieb—to breach his professional boundary.

Every time Newt asked himself why, he felt himself circling a horrible truth like the drain: Hermann would only do it if he expected never to see Newt again.

But why? Where had he gone? Why wouldn’t he answer? His radio silence had at first worried Newt. Sometime after the media frenzy about the painting died down, he grew angry. He stopped calling the Institute sometime in February. When they got the green light for season two, he watched the date approach with resentful, obstinate silence. Now Mako left the messages that went unanswered. He was mad at Hermann for running away, as he saw it, leaving him thrashing in the dark. Literally and metaphorically.

Most days he kept his head up. Pre-production got off to a good start. But some days he was consumed with the unbearable feeling of a spectacularly failed shot, an irrevocable mistake in an unmissable chance. Some days the ache was enough to overwhelm. He didn’t know what he’d done wrong, only that he had, and that it had led to some tragic first-last-kiss and a slammed-shut door. Everything inside him would open like a trapdoor and pour out his stomach. He would feel sick. Helpless. He would stand in the office kitchen at the window overlooking the frozen Charles and watch the lamps turn on all at once on the Esplanade. Then he’d go back into the studio to edit more listener call-ins for BPR, sift through another twenty emails from Black Tapes listeners, try not to think, try not to think, fail. The thoughts pressed into the periphery of his vision like waking sleep specters.

He heard Hermann’s goodbye breath as he pulled away. He felt Hermann’s hand so lightly on his chest—so polite, even as he reached across an unbreachable boundary as if it were nothing. He heard the door slam over and over like his own thrumming pulse.

And when his days were not numb or drowning, there were days—moments, usually—where he simply missed him. Could you miss someone who wouldn’t let you know them? If you could, he did. And if you couldn’t, then he did know him, despite Hermann’s best efforts. Newt missed his know-it-all voice, his frustrated sigh, his unmistakable step; the back of his head as he bent to read something intently, the cropped hair fading to nothing on his neck; the tightness of his hands; the answer he had for everything, the answers he wouldn’t give up for anything; the truth he kept behind him, stepping a circle with his back to it, whether to protect it or avoid it, Newt never knew. And then Newt would wish to drop everything and run outside, dash across the frozen river, up the bank, pound on the Institute door and have it open. See him again. He wanted to know what it meant—the tapes, the kiss, everything—he wanted to know what the second one felt like, to know the width of his waist and the strength of his fingers, the sounds of his uneven breathing, the thrum in the cage of his chest.

But he didn’t call. And he barely slept. And still the trees budded threateningly, the river thawed, and May drew closer.
VOICEOVER: Welcome to Season Two of The Black Tapes Podcast. I’m your host, Newt Geiszler.

This season, we’re continuing our exploration of belief and the search for truth through a series of unsolved paranormal cases. Our story progresses in order, week by week. So, if you’re a first-time listener, welcome to the show! You’ll have to start at episode one if you want even the faintest idea of what I’m talking about.

NEWT: It’s been about six months since our last episode. Six *long* months, for you, I bet. Let me assure you, they have been very long for us. Dare I say the six longest months of my life? *(confidingly)* That might not be an exaggeration.

We ended our last episode with several major revelations. First: that Vanessa Gottlieb, who has been missing for the last ten years, may be alive and in Florida. Second: that someone anonymously mailed us a certain painting. You probably heard about that on the news. The national media frenzy ruined our cliffhanger a bit. But after the painting furor died down, we hit something of a dead zone. Ghosts hibernating for the winter, maybe. Or maybe it was the radio silence from our subject and collaborator, Dr. Hermann Gottlieb.

But in the spring, things picked up. Fast. A lot has happened, and there’s a lot to sort through. We’re going to do our best to make sense of it all. We’ll start by doing updates with Mako, my producer.

MAKO: So at the time of recording, it’s May 1st. Our first day recording for season two.

NEWT: *(politely)* Whoop-whoop.

MAKO: But we’ve been doing plenty of pre-pro. We had a lot of mail to sort through. So, I’m going to ask you for updates on some of the questions I’m sure our listeners have. Cool?

NEWT: Hit me.

MAKO: So number one, do we have any idea where Tomás Hawking is?

NEWT: No. Well, sort of. We got nothing for about five months, and then, in March, he sent us another one of his cryptic emails.

MAKO: He sure did.

NEWT: So, the one attachment was a photo. It’s a landscape shot of some hills and trees, with a river. Looks nice. No landmarks or distinguishing features, though. No buildings. So we didn’t know where it was, *until*...
MAKO: *(chuffed)* Yes. Well, I thought it might be geotagged. Most phones do that automatically nowadays. So I checked the metadata.

NEWT: And was it?

MAKO: No. But it gave me the idea to check his other email attachments—like that audio file he sent us last year.

MAKO: Yes. It’s geotagged.

NEWT: *(excited)* Really?

MAKO: Yes. I wish I’d realized before. So, now we know where Tomás was, six months ago.

NEWT: So where was he?

MAKO: Limoges, France.

NEWT: What’s there?

MAKO: Not much. I have the exact coordinates, but according to Google Maps, it’s just an empty stretch of road.

NEWT: Hm. Do we have the budget to fly to France?

MAKO: No. But I have another idea.

NEWT (VO): She always does. So we reached out through our networks and found someone in France with the time and inclination...

MALE VOICE: *(deep, affable)* Hello?

MAKO: *(warmly)* Hi, Raleigh.

NEWT (VO): Raleigh Becket is an old friend of ours. We worked with him at NPR until he got his dream promotion to Europe, where he now works for the BBC World Service. He also used to date a certain producer I know...

MAKO: Can you hear us?

BECKET: Mako Mori, is that you?

NEWT: *(fake grumpy)* Ahem. Me, too.

BECKET: Hi, Newt.

NEWT: Did you get the files we sent you?

BECKET: All business, huh?

NEWT: Don’t flirt with me in front of Mako, Becket. Not cool.

MAKO: *(laughs)*

BECKET: But yes, I did. I’m in Paris right now...
NEWT: Well la-di-dah.

BECKET: ...But I should be able to head down to Limoges.

MAKO: Any idea what’s down there?

BECKET: Not much, as far as I know. A booming wine business.

MAKO: Hmm.

BECKET: But I’ll see what I can find. I’ll keep an eye out for long-lost paintings worth millions of dollars.

NEWT: Hey, not everyone can find those. We just happen to be very talented.

MAKO: Shh, Newt. Thank you, Raleigh. We appreciate it.

BECKET: Of course. Let me know if there’s anything else around here for me to dig into, and you got it.

MAKO: Thanks.

BECKET: Talk to you guys soon.

(Skype hang-up sound)

NEWT: He’s jealous.

MAKO: Of?

NEWT: Our painting.

(resume updates segment)

NEWT: (to audience) We’ll get to that painting later. Now. Back to updates.

MAKO: Yes. Second question, have we identified your mystery man, alias Sexy Danny Ocean?

NEWT: The Great Coffee Cup Heist of 2012 remains unsolved. As yet.

MAKO: What about the Hall family?

NEWT: It’s been almost a year since we first interviewed them. Laurie reached out via email. She apologized for pushing us away, and said they haven’t been having any problems since they got Tessa back.

MAKO: That’s good to hear. And last of all, do we have any updates on the Vanessa Gottlieb case?

NEWT: Nope. We have one reported sighting, last December, in Homestead, Florida. We’ve been in touch with Ms. Smoot since, but she hasn’t seen her again.

MAKO: And her husband?

NEWT: We also have not heard back from Dr. Gottlieb since December.
(voicemail message plays) Hello. You’ve reached the office of Dr. Hermann Gottlieb. Please leave a message and I will return your call as soon as possible.

NEWT (VO): Gottlieb left his assistant, Marian King, in charge of the Institute during his absence. She told me he’d taken, quote, “an unofficial and temporary leave.” When I asked her how long he’d been gone, she told me it was “undetermined.”

So, where does this leave us? The Black Tapes Podcast, minus the tapes? For the time being, it seems so. We aren’t totally without mystery, though. We got a lot of interesting emails during the break—more on those later.

And then there’s our painting.

DR. SHAO: Well if it isn’t my old enemy, back again.

NEWT: (warmly) Good to see you too!

SHAO: Come in, Newt. (sound of chair moving) You don’t look so good, dude.

NEWT: Been getting that a lot.

SHAO: Well, I don’t have to guess why you’re here.

NEWT: So you watch the news too?

NEWT (VO): I sat down with Dr. Qian Shao, our friend the art history professor from Season One. I visited their office in January, shortly after we received the painting anonymously, to discuss it.

The painting we received was not Il Sorriso Capovolto. It was, as I’m sure you heard on any news network for the next week, a formerly obscure Dutch painting called Landscape with Obelisk. Which also happens to be one of the paintings stolen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner in 1990.

As soon as Mako and I received the canvas-shaped package, we suspected something was afoot. We immediately called the museum, brought it in, and let them open it for us. The suspense of those 90 minutes almost ruptured my spleen.

When we opened it and found this Flinck, rather than the Caravaggio, I expected them to be disappointed. I certainly was. But the museum folk were ecstatic. Keep in mind, these works were stolen 22 years ago. Not hide nor hair had been seen since, until this one.

Once they authenticated it, they broke the news. Mako and I got interviewed by a lot of outlets. Suddenly our little New England podcast had a national platform and a lot of curious onlookers. A lot of curious onlookers, wondering, justifiably, why reporters making a podcast about ghosts and demons had been the recipients of a missing painting.

Of course, we were wondering the same thing.

NEWT: So what can you tell us about this painting?

SHAO: Well, Landscape with Obelisk is by Dutch painter Govert Flinck. It was painted in the so-called Dutch Golden Age, a.k.a. the 17th century.
NEWT: Can you describe it for us?

SHAO: Sure. So it’s a landscape, pretty normal for the time, with a large tree in the foreground taking up a lot of the composition. There’s a couple of small figures by the tree, one man talking to another on a horse, and behind them a road leads down to a bridge. The bridge leads in to a small town. There’s also, in the background, as the title suggests, an obelisk.

NEWT: Is there anything interesting you can tell us about this painting’s history?

SHAO: Not much. It’s not my area of expertise. (suspicious) I’m starting to think I’m the only art historian you know.

NEWT: You’re the only one I find threatening. All the others are total dweebs. But when I come to your office I’m not sure if I’m going to learn something or get pummeled.

SHAO: So gratifying to hear.

NEWT: And what can I say, I like to live a life of danger.

SHAO: (laughs) The only things about its history I can tell you is that for a while, it was incorrectly attributed to Rembrandt, whom Flinck studied under. But by far the most interesting thing that ever happened to this painting was getting kidnapped.

NEWT: What about the painter?

SHAO: Govert Flinck was a pretty typical painter for his time. He apprenticed under Rembrandt, like I said. Eventually he bloomed into a career of commissions for official and diplomatic portraits.

NEWT: So... what do we know about this obelisk?

SHAO: Frankly, nothing. It’s unknown what town this is meant to depict, if any. There’s no other record of an obelisk like this in the 17th-century Netherlands, though it’s very possible the records are simply lost. But hey, if you want me to say it’s a magic and/or cursed obelisk for your show, I will. (louder, to mic) Listeners, the obelisk is cursed. We found it on the moon. It is bringing the knowledge of good and evil to monkeys.

NEWT: (laughing) No—no, no. Thank you, though.

SHAO: Anytime.

NEWT: Can you think of any reason someone would send this to us?

SHAO: Best guess, based on the content of your show?

NEWT: Aw, you listen?

SHAO: Obviously. Best guess? Someone sent it as a threat.

NEWT: A threat?

SHAO: You initially thought it was the Caravaggio, right? The painting that curses anyone who owns it? Why wouldn’t you? It wasn’t. But whoever sent it made sure you signed for it.

NEWT (VO): I had thought of that, too. Mako, who would have been the actual target of the curse, wasn’t too impressed. Even if it was a threat, she said, it was the threat of a curse. “Yeah, right,” she said. I told her she sounded like Gottlieb. And she told me I
sounded like someone who wasn’t getting enough sleep.

_(interlude music #5)_

NEWT (VO): It’s true. I didn’t want to include this in the show, as it’s sort of personal, but Mako said it would be good for me. So, here you go: since the end of our first season, I’ve been having problems sleeping.

It’s not the first time I’ve had insomnia. I’ve always been a workaholic, unable to sit or stop or let things drop. It’s in my nature. Normally it doesn’t worry me. It was especially bad, for example, in college. Since then, it comes and goes. I sometimes lie awake for hours, unable to slow my brain down for sleep.

This bout, though, is different. It isn’t falling asleep that’s the problem—I can drift off. It’s staying asleep. I always wake up within an hour. I can’t get more than an hour of consecutive sleep.

It’s pretty bad. It’s not interfering with my work—“yet,” says Mako. So I’m starting treatment before it does. I’ll keep you updated.

_(voicemail message plays) Hello. You’ve reached the office of Dr. Hermann Gottlieb. Please leave a message and I will return your call as soon as possible._

NEWT (VO): So there we were: out on the water without our guide. What would The Black Tapes be without the tapes people sent to Gottlieb? But over the winter, we discovered that we had fostered a similar space to the Institute. Despite the lack of prize money, people had started to send us their claims of the paranormal.

There were, of course, a lot of messages. We set about wading through them. But one morning, I ran into someone outside our office who had left us several messages. Her name was Georgia Cavallon.

_(voicemail message plays)_

WOMAN: (harried, rushed) Hi, there, my name is Georgia Cavallon. I’m from Maine. I sent your team an email last week, about um, about my son Jacob. I know you probably get a lot of these messages but I... I think you’ll be interested in my case. My email has everything... the report, and the photos. Um. Okay. Thanks. Bye.

NEWT (VO): Georgia Cavallon is a single working mom with a son named Jacob, who is six. Georgia is short and slight, with long, wavy hair. She reminded me of Lucille Hall, a bit. Something in the wariness in her eyes. She invited me up to her home in Portland.

NEWT: So Georgia, could you repeat for our listeners what you told me?

GEORGIA: (clears throat) Of course. So, it started about two years ago. Jacob was about four, and just starting preschool. I’m not a superstitious person, I want to say, up front. I never really believed in like... ghosts, or anything.

NEWT: But you listen to our show.

GEORGIA: Oh—(laughs nervously) yeah. I mean, for fun. That’s not really—why. Um, so this was two years ago. We were living in a different house then. It was the bottom floor of an old two-family owned by this old lady. Her husband had died recently and she started renting out the downstairs
apartment. I had a new job, Jacob was starting at school. It was a clean slate.

Well a few weeks into September, I heard a voice in his room. At night. On the baby monitor. It was very faint. So faint, I thought it was coming from upstairs—the landlady watching TV, or something, you know. I went in to check.

NEWT: What did you see?

GEORGIA: Well, nothing. Just Jacob. But Jacob was awake. I asked him if he had been talking, and he said “Yes.” I said, “Shouldn’t you be sleeping?” And he said, “It’s rude to ignore people.”

I said, “What?” But he didn’t say anything else, just curled up and pulled the covers over his head.

NEWT: Hm.

GEORGIA: Yeah... It was a creepy thing to say. But kids are weird, right? Jacob had an active imagination. I chalked it up to that.

NEWT: But?

GEORGIA: ...Well, it happened again. Not long after. Maybe the next week. I heard him talking on the monitor—it was louder, this time. Loud enough that I could tell it definitely was Jacob. But it sounded for all the world like he was talking with someone. He was laughing. Like they were joking around.

I went up, opened his door, and he was standing on the bed, reaching towards the ceiling. He froze when I came in. “Honey, what are you doing?” I said. He just stared at me. “Honey? Were you talking to someone?” “Yes,” he said. “What were you doing?” “He was going to lift me up.” “Who was?” “My friend.” “That’s who you were talking to?” “Mhm.”

NEWT: Interesting.

GEORGIA: So, yeah. I didn’t take it as weird, at first. Like I said. Not superstitious. Active imagination. But it kept getting more... intense. We would be sitting quietly, at the table or in the living room, and suddenly he’d burst out laughing. I would say, “What’s so funny?” And he would say, “He made me laugh.”

It started to unsettle me. Eventually, I took it to the school psychologist. She said it was just imagination. She recommended that I give Jacob more “stimulating” activities at home, to channel his creative energy. Like art.

So I did. We started doing lots of drawing and coloring. This worked for a while, I felt. He was talking less about his imaginary friend. But he was drawing... a lot.

NEWT: Was that... a bad thing?

GEORGIA: Creativity wouldn’t be a bad thing. But Jacob was drawing the same things over and over.

NEWT: What things?

GEORGIA: (sounding uncomfortable) They were sort of... shadows.

NEWT: Well... I mean. Don’t all kids’ drawings look like scribbles?

GEORGIA: No... not like this. They weren’t stick figures. They were... substantive. Scratched-in.
Kind of like... kind of like cave paintings.

NEWT (VO): Georgia showed me some of the drawings. She was right—they were a bit like cave paintings. And they were weirdly uniform for kids’ drawings. There are rows and rows of black, scratchy shadow people. Always black. Always with long arms and long legs. If I had a kid who started drawing these, I’d be a bit freaked.

NEWT: So what happened next?

GEORGIA: (sighs) Well, I wasn’t panicking yet. It was what happened next that did it.

I heard some things on the baby monitor that night—just sounds of movement. Whispering. I thought maybe Jacob was having bad dreams. Talking in his sleep. I poked my head in, but everything looked normal. So I went to bed.

The next morning, I go in to wake him up. I open the door, the room is full of sunlight. Takes a minute for my eyes to adjust. When they do, I see it. The walls... the walls are completely covered in drawings. Drawings of the marching shadow people. Row after row after row after row. Thick as a wallpaper pattern.

NEWT: Oh my god.

GEORGIA: I... freaked out. I shook Jacob awake and asked him why. He wouldn’t say—he wouldn’t say it wasn’t him, but he wouldn’t say it was, either. And he wouldn’t look at the drawings. But I made him show me his hands. They were covered with black.

The pictures on the wall looked like charcoal or maybe crayon—I couldn’t tell. I wanted to find the crayon, or whatever, wherever they were. Although, there was so much on the walls that it must have taken twenty crayons. I searched everywhere. I got a little frantic. I couldn’t find anything. I couldn’t find a crayon or pencil or charcoal. But I found something else.

NEWT: What?

GEORGIA: Under his bed... in the hardwood floor. There were symbols carved into it. A wheel. In the center was a pentagram.

NEWT: Wow. Really? Do you have a picture?

GEORGIA: No... no. As soon as I saw that I freaked and took him out. I didn’t let him back in that room. We moved out immediately.

NEWT: So the carvings. Those were new?

GEORGIA: The thing is, the apartment was furnished. The bed belonged to the landlady. I had never really looked under it before. So it’s possible they were there already. It was certainly my first—my first superstitious thought.

NEWT: What was?

GEORGIA: Well, that the apartment was haunted. That those symbols were... something, and that sleeping over them was doing something to my son’s head.

NEWT: So you bounced.

GEORGIA: We sure did. We moved in here. About a year ago.
NEWT: And did it help?

GEORGIA: No. It didn’t.

SPONSOR BREAK #1

(interlude music #4)

NEWT (VO): Georgia brought me up to Jacob’s room to tell the next part of the story. Jacob was out with the nanny during our interview.

NEWT: So you moved in here last year?

GEORGIA: Yes. Fresh start number two.

NEWT: The wallpaper is nice. Crayon-free.

GEORGIA: (slight laugh) Yes. Well, the fresh start lasted hardly a week before things got strange again. I came into the kitchen for breakfast and found the table had been turned.

NEWT: Turned...?

GEORGIA: 90 degrees. I had it up against the window on the long side, and when I came in, the short side was against the window. Two of the chairs were knocked over.

NEWT: That must have been unsettling.

GEORGIA: No kidding. I fixed it. Next day, it was fine, but instead, the living room furniture had moved.

NEWT: Moved how?

GEORGIA: The couch was rotated around. I fixed that too. The next day it was the armchairs. They were turned around and pushed up facing the walls. I was starting to get seriously panicked. The third or fourth night was when I heard it.

NEWT: Heard what?

GEORGIA: I heard the furniture moving. I was lying awake in bed. And then, downstairs, I heard a slow, scraping, creaking across the floorboards. Someone, or something, was moving our furniture around down there.

I was petrified. I stayed completely still in bed until it stopped. I don’t think I slept at all that night. When I went down the next morning, sure enough, the kitchen table had been moved.

The next night, I tried to record the sounds. I heard them again. But when I played the recording back, they didn’t show up. The mic on my phone wasn’t strong enough.

So the night after, I left the baby monitor downstairs. It automatically starts recording when a sound is heard. Then I laid awake upstairs, waiting.

NEWT: And?
GEORGIA: And nothing. I heard nothing. It was like the... whatever it was... knew. And it wasn’t going to let me catch it.

*(interlude music #5)*

NEWT (VO): So, I know what you’re thinking. Or maybe I just know what Dr. Gottlieb would be thinking. He would be asking me to ask her for the hard evidence. So far, she hadn’t produced any.

GEORGIA: So I installed a nannycam.

NEWT: Ah. Good on you.

GEORGIA: Well, I was starting to get... actually superstitious at this point. I thought, if the cam catches it happening, I’ll have something to show to the police. Or, if it doesn’t happen when I’m watching...

NEWT: ...Then it stops as long as the nannycam is up.

GEORGIA: Exactly. Well, whether it was the nannycam or me regaining my sanity, it worked. The furniture stopped moving.

NEWT: That must have been a relief.

GEORGIA: It was. For a little while.

NEWT: Until...?

GEORGIA: Soon after there was an... incident.

It was a weeknight, and I was exhausted. I was getting ready to take a hot shower. Jacob was in the living room drawing. Just as I got into the shower, I heard a knock on the door.

“I’ll be out in a few minutes, honey!” I said. I got into the shower. There was another knock. I said the same thing, told him to wait. Then there was another knock. Then another.

They started knocking harder, louder. Pounding on the door. I looked out around the curtain—I was terrified. The door was shaking in the frame. It got louder, and louder, and then—then it just stopped.

NEWT: And it wasn’t Jacob?

GEORGIA: *No.* It was *way* too powerful for a five-year-old. I was absolutely terrified. I put on a towel and opened the door. No one was there, of course. I hurried down the hall, still soaking wet, and found Jacob in the living room. He was sort of standing there. I asked, but he said he hadn’t heard anything.

NEWT: Was anyone else in the house? Besides the two of you?

GEORGIA: No. It was just us.

NEWT: Huh.

GEORGIA: But... I got it on the nannycam.

NEWT: Got what? The intruder?
GEORGIA: No... Something else.

NEWT (VO): Georgia pulled up the footage for me on her computer. Part of me was relieved she had something to show me. By this point, I had become a little concerned by the lack of evidence.

GEORGIA: There... see that?

NEWT: Um, I don’t think so.

(click, click)

GEORGIA: That.

NEWT: ...Oh.

NEWT (VO): She showed me the nannycam footage from the moment of the knocking incident. It’s the living room, from a high angle. You can see most of the room, and the doorway into the hall. Jacob is sitting at the coffee table, drawing. Then, as if following a prompt we can’t hear, he gets up.

He stands up and walks closer to the wall where the nannycam is. He tilts his head back and looks up. Not directly into the camera, but just under it. Then he starts talking.

NEWT: Is there sound on this thing?

GEORGIA: No. Sorry.

NEWT (VO): So, he stands there talking to nothing. Thin air. Then he stops, stares, with his mouth a little bit open. Like he’s listening. Then his eyes move, like he’s watching someone walk away.

Then...

Well here’s the thing. Something moves across the camera.

It’s brief—not more than a half-second. It obscures the bottom half of the frame. It’s not much more than a shadow.

NEWT: Wow. That’s... Interesting.

GEORGIA: What? It’s terrifying, is what it is.

NEWT (VO): Another few seconds go by with Jacob staring at nothing, and then Georgia comes running into the room in a towel. She’s frantic. She grabs her son by the shoulders, says something to him, then pulls him into a hug.

It was her testimony, alone. But the video evidence certainly proved one thing—whatever she saw or heard that night, it terrified her.

GEORGIA: Soon after that, I found something else. That’s what I brought you up here to see.

NEWT: Please.

(sound of fabric)
GEORGIA: This.

NEWT (VO): Georgia Cavallon pulled the rug back on the floor by Jacob’s bed. There were two gashes in the floor.

GEORGIA: Someone moved his bed. They scraped the floor, cause the bed is so heavy.

NEWT: So it couldn’t have been Jacob?

GEORGIA: No. This bed took two men to move. When I saw the gashes, I had this horrible feeling in my gut. I dropped down to the floor to look under the bed and... sure enough.

NEWT: Symbols?

GEORGIA: (upset) The same symbol wheel. Carved into the floor.

NEWT (VO): I got down and took a look myself. It was hard to see under there, from that angle, so I took a picture with the flash on my phone.

The carvings were rough, hacked. They were not the work of a craftsman. If it wasn’t for the depth of the gouges, I would have said a kid did it. But I don’t know any kids who have that kind of wrist strength.

I didn’t really recognize any of the symbols. I kept the picture, anyway, in case I had someone to show it to in the future.

GEORGIA: Needless to say, when I saw those symbols, I was horrified. The same thing, all over again. That was when I first called the Gottlieb Institute.

NEWT: Did he answer?

GEORGIA: I got a callback from some girl, but nothing else.

NEWT: When did you try?

GEORGIA: January.

NEWT: Mm. He’s been... hard to reach, lately.

GEORGIA: So he isn’t coming?

NEWT: Sorry.

GEORGIA: (disappointed) Oh.

(beat)

GEORGIA: Well there’s... one more thing.

NEWT: What’s that?

GEORGIA: Come look in the closet.

NEWT (VO): Listener, I did. And wouldn’t you know, I got the strangest sense of déja- vu?

Georgia Cavallon moved her son’s clothes aside and there, in the back of the closet, was
a shape on the wall. A shadowy, smudgy, spectral shape. I could see gaps for eyes, and maybe a gap for the mouth. But the gap for the mouth was above the eyes.

After my initial shock, I started to notice some things. If it reminded me of Tessa Hall’s closet, it was only conceptually. First of all, this was done in crayon. That much was obvious. Tessa’s was more like a smoke smudge or mold stain. This was more a scribble than a smudge. The hand of the artist was obvious.

A human hand, if I had to guess.

NEWT: So this was why you called our podcast?

GEORGIA: Yes.

NEWT: Why, exactly?

GEORGIA: Well it... it looks just like the one in Tessa Hall’s closet. And in the cabin. Doesn’t it?

NEWT: I can see some similarities, yes.

GEORGIA: Well?

NEWT: ...Well?

GEORGIA: Is it the same?

NEWT: Well...

GEORGIA: (urgently) I need to know, Newt. I need to know if he’s like her.

NEWT: (cautiously) Like Tessa? Like her how?

GEORGIA: Is he strange like her? Is someone or some thing going to come for him one day?

NEWT: (uncomfortable) Well... I don’t really know. It’s hard to say. There’s some similarities between your cases, but... overall, I mean, it’s not like...

GEORGIA: So you can’t help us?

NEWT: I’m sorry. I wish I could do more. I’ll take your case to the Gottlieb Institute. I’ll see what they say...

GEORGIA: (sighs angrily)

NEWT (VO): I didn’t really know how to respond to Georgia’s urgency. There were parts of her story that I didn’t feel like I understood. Then there was my own emotional state. Would my processing, both emotional and of the evidence, be better if I had gotten some sleep?

It’s not our job to solve these cases, just report on them—but someone brings you into their home, and shows you their most secret, defenseless desperation, it’s hard not to feel responsible.

But solving them wasn’t our job—that was Gottlieb’s job. And he wasn’t here.

(interlude music #6)
I asked Georgia to put me in touch with Jacob’s nanny, Grace. I wanted a second opinion. Grace is a student at a nearby college.

NEWT: So the first thing I wanted to ask you about is an incident from the winter. Where Georgia heard knocking on her bathroom door while she was in the shower. Do you know about this?

GRACE: (young woman, somewhat harsh voice) Oh, yeah. I remember that. And she talked about it for weeks after. Did she show you the film?

NEWT: (surprised) Yes—she showed you? I wouldn’t think, since it’s a nannycam...

GRACE: Oh, no. I mean, yes, she showed me. Later. But I was there.

NEWT: You were there? That night?

GRACE: Yes.

NEWT: She said she and Jacob were alone.

GRACE: Well, I don’t know what she’s talking about. I was there. I’m there every weeknight. I was probably in the kitchen while she took a shower.

NEWT: Did you hear the knocking?

GRACE: No. But honestly I don’t remember the specifics. It was a pretty normal weeknight. It might even have been me knocking on the door.

NEWT: Pounding on the door?

GRACE: I mean, probably not, but who knows how she heard it?

NEWT: So she showed you the footage? With the shadow?

GRACE: She did...

NEWT: ...But?

GRACE: Well, that might have been me too.

NEWT: The shadow? It was pretty high up.

GRACE: I might have been dusting. Like I said, I don’t remember.

NEWT: Well you don’t appear anywhere else in the footage.

GRACE: There’s another doorway, to the left on that wall. The wall where the camera is. It leads into the kitchen.

NEWT: Yeah, I remember seeing that.

GRACE: I could have come in and out without showing up.

NEWT: I guess it’s possible. Yeah. So does this sort of thing happen often?

GRACE: What sort of thing? Like, weird things?

NEWT: Yeah.
GRACE: *All* the time.

NEWT: Do you have any theory as to why?

GRACE: Like, do I think the house is haunted?

NEWT: *(laughs)* I’m not trying to lead the witness.

GRACE: *(serious)* Well I don’t. I don’t think it’s haunted.

NEWT: So what do you think?

GRACE: (...) Do you know Georgia doesn’t sleep?

NEWT: What?

GRACE: She’s an insomniac. She has it bad. She didn’t start taking meds for it until about a year ago, I think. I think the meds help, but they...

NEWT: *(worried)* They what?

GRACE: Well, you know how those sleep meds are. They’re *potent*. They make people sleepwalk.

NEWT: ...Do you think Georgia Cavallon is sleepwalking?

GRACE: Sleepwalking, having waking sleep visions, whatever. I don’t know. But I think “haunted house” or “demon child” is her avoidance explanation for what’s really going on.

NEWT: ...Which is?

GRACE: That she needs *help*. Like, the furniture thing. That worries me.

NEWT: The moving living room furniture?

GRACE: The moving *bedroom* furniture. I was cleaning up Jacob’s room a few months ago and I found these scrapes in the floor...

NEWT: Yeah, Georgia showed me.

GRACE: ...Well?

NEWT: *(realizing)* You think *Georgia* made those carvings?

GRACE: *(uncomfortable)* Well—yes. I mean, obviously it wasn’t Jacob. There’s no way he could move that giant bed.

NEWT: But he draws on the walls sometimes.

GRACE: According to his mother.

NEWT: You haven’t seen him draw his shadow people?

GRACE: Oh, those. Yes, I’ve seen those drawings. But I’ve never seen him draw on a wall. He’s pretty well-behaved.

NEWT: You don’t think the way he draws the same shape over and over is strange?
GRACE: Not really. I used to babysit a little girl who only drew rainbows. Over and over, day after day, rainbow, rainbow, rainbow. She was autistic, she liked the repetition. Jacob hasn’t been tested, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he was on the spectrum.

NEWT: So you really think Georgia carved those things under the bed?

GRACE: Yes.

NEWT: But why would she do that?

GRACE: I don’t know. Maybe she did it in her sleep. Maybe she has munchausen disease.

NEWT: Munchausen by proxy?

GRACE: Yes. Or maybe she just wants the attention.

NEWT: Well. That’s a little dismissive, don’t you think?

GRACE: ...She really likes your show. Did she mention that?

NEWT: Well, obviously I know she listens...

GRACE: No, no. She’s like, a superfan. She listens all the time. I’ve heard the same episodes multiple times, just being around the house. She tried to get me to listen. It’s not my thing—sorry.

NEWT: (troubled) So you think she’s been manipulating her experiences? To line them up with what happens on the podcast? To get on it?

GRACE: It’s possible, isn’t it? It’s more believable than a furniture-moving ghost, isn’t it?


e NEWT (VO): According to Georgia, she didn’t start listening to our show until this winter. Most everything happened before that. But is it possible that she’s... reimagining things? Or recontextualizing her past experiences with our new framework? What if she believes something that I put in her head, because she was sleep-deprived?

Or worse—what if she made it up? What if she was putting her son through this just to get on our show? There was some physical evidence—the scratched floor, the drawing in the closet, and the video. But many of the incidents came with no evidence besides her story.

Georgia wasn't the only caller-in that we interviewed. But we decided to include her because of the particular questions her story raised. I didn’t want to believe she made it up. I didn’t like being the skeptic. I wanted someone who would look at the video, and the photos, and tell me, definitively, whether or not it was real.

Even if I knew what they would say. It would have been nice to hear.

(interlude music #4)

NEWT (VO): The case left me feeling like we’d gotten nowhere. I almost called the Halls—but I was glad I didn’t. Because when I got back to the studio, Mako dropped this bombshell.

NEWT: What’s going on?

MAKO: I just got a call from Sheriff Collins. From the Westfield Police.
NEWT: With—Collins? What did he want?

MAKO: Tessa Hall’s kidnapper. They caught him.

NEWT: *(shocked)* What?

MAKO: *(grim)* Yeah.

NEWT: How? Where—*who?*

MAKO: Apparently his name is Robert Motherwell. He hasn’t given them much. But they found him the same old way—he returned to the scene of the crime.

NEWT: Wow. The cabin?

MAKO: Yeah. When they found him he was just sitting there. They said it seemed like he was waiting for them.

NEWT: So what did Collins want with us?

MAKO: He was actually... looking to get in touch with Dr. Gottlieb.

NEWT: ...Aren’t we all.

MAKO: Yeah, well, apparently Motherwell will only speak to Gottlieb. He’s insisting on it. He won’t give them anything.

NEWT: What? Seriously?

MAKO: He said that. He specifically mentioned our show to the cops.

NEWT: Yikes... I bet Collins didn’t like that.

MAKO: *(darkly)* He did *not.* He was *very* displeased.

NEWT: *(laughing)* What did he say?

MAKO: I can’t actually repeat what he said, on air...

NEWT: Right. *(nervous laugh)* Well... I guess we have to... what? Leave another message at the Gottlieb Institute?

MAKO: I guess so.

*(voicemail message plays)* Hello. You’ve reached the office of Dr. Hermann Gottlieb. Please leave a message and I will return your call as soon as possible.

NEWT (VO): We left Gottlieb a message telling him the situation with the kidnapper. No reply. Collins called us again the next day. He yelled at me this time.

With that, I decided I’d had enough. I jumped on the Red Line and rode across the river to the Institute.

It was a chilly afternoon for May. The leaves were finally out. I hurried up those familiar brick steps. It had been six months since the last time I was there.

NEWT: Hey, Marian. Long time no see.
MARIAN: (high, mild voice, somewhat brittle) Hm? Oh, hi, Newt.

NEWT (VO): Marian King is Dr. Gottlieb’s assistant. She’s small, with short hair and bright lipstick. I think she goes to Harvard? I don’t know much about her. Usually it seems like she’s judging me. She’s definitely good at her job, because her job is keeping me and others Gottlieb doesn’t want to talk to at bay, and, well, I haven’t caught a glimpse of him in months.

Most of the time, she’s the one we leave messages with. She’s probably pretty sick of us at this point. Usually, she doesn’t like us recording her, but today, I was able to talk her into it.

NEWT: I like the Oscar Wilde shirt.

KING: (distantly) Thanks.

NEWT: What are you reading?

KING: Studies in the Psychology of Sex by Havelock Ellis.

NEWT: Oh. Yeah. Classic. (obviously lost) For school?

KING: No.

NEWT: Oh. Uh. Cool. So... Is the doctor in?

KING: No. He told me to take a message, though, so (sigh) go ahead.

NEWT: So you’ve seen him recently? Does that mean he’s around?

KING: He told me to relay the message.

NEWT: Well, it’s kind of important.

KING: I bet.

NEWT: No, seriously. It’s a police matter.

(silence as King presumably gives him an unimpressed look)

NEWT: (sigh) Sheriff Collins with the Westfield Police wants to talk to him. Like, really wants to. He’s calling me and yelling at me. I’d rather he yell at your boss.

KING: And what’s this in regard to?

NEWT: The Tessa Hall case.

KING: Got it.

(sound of tearing paper)

KING: I’ll make sure he gets it.

(pause)

KING: Was there something else, Newt?
NEWT: Aren’t you going to call him?

KING: Can’t if you hover.

NEWT: Right. Sorry. Do you mind if I use your bathroom?

KING: (sigh) Go ahead.

NEWT (VO): Listener, at this point, I regret to say, I took the only recourse I had: underhanded journalistic slinking. In my defense, times were desperate, and the police were literally on my tail. I went down the hall, snuck around the corner, and went upstairs to Dr. Gottlieb’s office.

(sound of footsteps)

(door creaks open)

NEWT: ...Whoa.

NEWT (VO): Dr. Gottlieb’s office was... kind of a scene.

It was a mess, actually. He had gone full-on conspiracy nut. I’m talking thumbtack and red string spiderweb, all around the walls. The walls were plastered with printouts, newspaper clippings, pictures, notes. There were photos and files and disk drives and tapes all over every desk, chair, and even on the floor. It was complete turmoil.

He had not run away, but instead, run right off the deep end.

I stepped in with a mix of thrill and horror. So, he was alive.

And this was what he had been doing.

(sound of paper)

NEWT: (muttering) Hey...

NEWT (VO): After a long look around the room, some things started to jump out. I saw a picture of Vanessa, and a picture of Father Dirac. Then I saw another picture I recognized.

NEWT: ...Is that...

(door opens)

KING: Hey!

NEWT: Oh, [expletive bleeped].

KING: What are you doing in here?

NEWT: Marian. Where the hell is Dr. Gottlieb? Have you seen this? Is he okay? I need to talk to him right now, and if you don’t tell me where he is I swear I—

HERMANN: It’s alright, Marian.

NEWT: (...)
HERMANN: *(hoarse)* Hello, Newton.

NEWT: *(voice stripped)* Hermann.

*(slow footsteps as Hermann enters the room)*

*(beat)*

NEWT: I've been trying to get in touch.

HERMANN: I know.

NEWT: It's... um. It's the Westfield Police, they need you to...

HERMANN: I know.

NEWT: Well you—

HERMANN: Newton.

NEWT: ...Yes?

HERMANN: I need your help.

*(outro music begins)*

NEWT (VO): Next episode: Hermann goes west to speak with the kidnapper, plus we follow up on some long-lost friends from last season, and watch a new old tape.

I'm Newt Geiszler. It's the Black Tapes Podcast. See you next month.

*(music fades out)*
VOICEOVER: Welcome to Season Two of The Black Tapes Podcast.

This season, we’re continuing our exploration of belief and the search for truth, and our profile of the enigmatic Dr. Hermann Gottlieb. We are examining his collection of unsolved cases, pursuing the theory that they are connected.

Our story progresses in order, week by week. So, if you’re a first-time listener, welcome to the show! You’ll have to start at episode one if you want to have the faintest idea what I’m talking about.

NEWT (VO): Our last episode ended in a bit of a cliffhanger. Sorry about that, kids.

We’ll pick up where we left off—the unexpected return of Dr. Gottlieb.

HERMANN: Hello, Newton.

NEWT: Hermann.

(beat)

NEWT: I’ve been trying to get in touch.

HERMANN: I know.

NEWT: It’s... um. It's the Westfield Police, they need you to...

HERMANN: I know.

NEWT: Well you—

HERMANN: Newton.

NEWT: ...Yes?

HERMANN: I need your help.

NEWT: What’s wrong?

HERMANN: Please, sit down.

(sound of papers being moved, someone sitting)

NEWT: ...Are you going to sit? You don’t look so good.

NEWT (VO): He didn’t. Dr. Gottlieb looked disheveled. His short hair had grown out
of its usual trim. His sleeves were rolled up, and his top shirt button was open. I know that doesn’t sound like much, but on him, it looked downright disastrous. He even had five o’clock shadow, which frankly, I didn’t think was possible.

But most of all, it was his eyes. They were half-dead. He hardly seemed to see me.

He looked bad. I would know—I haven’t been looking so hot lately, either.

NEWT: So you’ve been working on... this?

HERMANN: ...Yes.

NEWT: It’s... a lot to take in.

HERMANN: I know. It looks...

NEWT: (cautiously) Thorough...?

HERMANN: It looks insane. I know.

NEWT: But you’re fine.

HERMANN: Yes.


(beat)

HERMANN: I could say the same of you.

NEWT: (quietly) Well...

HERMANN: You have questions.

NEWT: No [expletive bleeped].

HERMANN: Are you going to keep recording?

NEWT: What?

HERMANN: I said, are you going to record this?

NEWT: ...Yes.

HERMANN: I’d prefer you didn’t.

NEWT: (blunt) Sorry. It’s my job.

HERMANN: And if I said I wouldn’t answer your questions, unless you stopped recording?

NEWT: (...)

(beat)

NEWT: I would go.

(long pause)
HERMANN: *(quietly)* Go ahead, then. Ask your questions.

NEWT: And then?

HERMANN: And then I have an appointment in Westfield.

   NEWT (VO): We’ll hear the rest of that interview later.

   Spoiler alert: he doesn’t answer most of my questions. Big surprise, I know.

   After we talked, Dr. G headed out on the Pike to speak to the kidnapper, Robert Motherwell. *(curtly)* Sheriff Collins made it very clear that the press corps was not invited.

NEWT: *(sounds like he’s pacing)* This is B.S., you know.

MAKO: It is.

NEWT: I should be in there, in that interview.

MAKO: It’s out of our hands, Newt. The FBI is involved in this investigation. We’re just a podcast.

NEWT: It’s suppression of the press, is what it is.

   ———— OFF THE RECORD ————

MAKO: ...You’re just wired.

NEWT: Oh yeah?

MAKO: Yeah. You know perfectly well why.

NEWT: No—no. It’s not that.

MAKO: Oh, it’s not?

NEWT: ...No. I’m fine.

MAKO: Because you don’t sound fine.

NEWT: *(sarcastically)* Please.

MAKO: How much did you sleep last night, Newt?

NEWT: I...

MAKO: (...)

NEWT: Maybe an hour.

MAKO: Did you go to your appointment with the sleep doctor?

NEWT: Yes! But you can’t expect it to start working instantaneously. It needs—

   ———— RESUME RECORD ————

*(phone rings)*
MAKO: This is Mako. (...) Yeah. Really? Whoa. Um... Okay. Yeah, I’ll give you my email. It’s [bleeped]. Okay. Thank you. Bye. (click)

NEWT: What is it?

MAKO: Dr. Gottlieb just arrived at the station. He’s sitting down with Robert Motherwell right now.

NEWT: ...And?

MAKO: And Motherwell requested the interview be recorded.

NEWT: ...Oh.

MAKO: He’s insisting on it. There’s nothing his lawyer can do to stop it.

NEWT: (perking up) So they’re going to send you the audio, when it’s done?

MAKO: (grimly) Yes.

(interlude music #6)

NEWT (VO): In the meantime, an update on my insomnia situation. As I mentioned last month, I’ve been experiencing rather serious sleep disruption. At Mako’s, um, strong urging, I made an appointment with a sleep doctor. The urging was something like, “Newt, if you don’t, I will resign as producer of this podcast.”

WOMAN: So how have you been feeling?

NEWT (VO): My sleep doctor's name is Dr. Joan Mitchell.

Now, I agreed to attend these sessions on one condition—that I could record my sessions and share anything relevant with you, dear listener. I explained to Dr. Mitchell that I thought sharing what I was experiencing would help me get past whatever it was. Dr. Mitchell was less than enthusiastic. She agreed to let me record the first two sessions, and then revisit the agreement.

DR. MITCHELL: How have you been finding the relaxation exercises?

NEWT: Well...

DR. MITCHELL: Have you done them?

NEWT: Yes.

DR. MITCHELL: And did they help?

NEWT: Well, they definitely helped me fall asleep...

DR. MITCHELL: ...But you’re not able to stay asleep?

NEWT: No. I always wake up within an hour. And then I can’t fall back asleep.

DR. MITCHELL: I’d like to avoid that type of language.

NEWT: Which was that?
DR. MITCHELL: Negative absolutes like “can’t” and “always.” Rather than saying “I can’t fall back asleep,” I’d rather you try saying something positive.

NEWT: (with some irony) I’m not feeling very positive about it, honestly.

DR. MITCHELL: (humoring him) Still. Try saying something like, “I fell asleep quicker than usual,” or something of that nature. It’s important that we use positive language around the subject of sleep and sleeping.

NEWT: Okay. I’ll try.

DR. MITCHELL: Great. Have you started your sleep journal?

NEWT: Er... Not yet.

DR. MITCHELL: Is there a reason why not?

NEWT: Well, I was wondering... is it alright if I do an audio journal?

DR. MITCHELL: That would be fine. The important thing is just that you record or write something each morning.

NEWT: Every morning. Got it.

(Interlude music #3)

NEWT (VO): According to the preliminary reports we obtained by wheedling over the phone, Motherwell claimed he was some kind of monk. He said he belonged to a brotherhood called “The Sylvan Order.”

Mako and I did some digging into that while we waited to get the sound file from his interview with Dr. Gottlieb.

MAKO: I found them!

NEWT: (excited) You did?

MAKO: Yes. I win again.

NEWT: Newt 3, Mako 17.

MAKO: (laughs) Come check it out. (Sound of rolling chair) I’ve been looking into the order that he claims to be a member of, The Sylvan Order. I found a reference to them in a local paper from 1985—the National Forestry Service found a community of monks living illegally on state property. They were living in Green Mountain National Forest, way deep in the woods. That’s in the southwest corner of Vermont. Here. (Sound of her tapping on screen)

NEWT: Oh, yeah. That’s not far from Westfield.

MAKO: No, not far. Have you heard of this, Dr. G?

HERMANN: (sounding more awake) No. As I said, I’ve never heard of this order before.

NEWT: So what happened? Were they arrested?

MAKO: (tapping on screen) Yes. Read from here.
NEWT: (reading aloud) “Forest rangers were able to apprehend six of the monks for illegal trespass and development in a national park, under the auspices of the International Union for...” blah blah... “An estimated 10 to 15 monks escaped the authorities. They are still at large.” What year was this?


NEWT: That’s around the time the Festival of Paine got started, isn’t it?

HERMANN: Approximately.

NEWT: (...)

HERMANN: ...If you’re trying to suggest a connection, Newton...

NEWT: Well...

MAKO: (interrupting) I just got an email from the police. They’re releasing the interview audio. They also sent along the, um, scans you requested, Dr. G?

HERMANN: Yes. Motherwell was found in possession of an unusual book. The police have it now, but they let me scan the pages. I think it will be of interest to you as well.

NEWT: What is it?

HERMANN: Most of the lettering appears to be Cyrillic, but it’s not Russian. I can’t read it. I’ll forward them to you both.

MAKO: Thanks. The interview is ready. I’m going to play it.

NEWT: Go for it.

(interview plays)

(sound of metal door closing in a concrete room)

(sound of chair moving, echoing)

HERMANN: You’ll need to sign this before we begin.

(sound of pen, then paper sliding)

HERMANN: Thank you. Tell me, why did you kidnap Tessa Hall?

MOTHERWELL: (mid-range, throaty voice, ambiguous age) You know why.

HERMANN: I’m afraid I don’t. That’s why I came here.

MOTHERWELL: You visited the cabin, didn’t you?

HERMANN: I did. You’re fully aware of that.

MOTHERWELL: Am I?

HERMANN: You listen to Newt Geiszler’s podcast.

MOTHERWELL: (slowly) You saw what was in that cabin. So then, you know.
HERMANN: Mr. Motherwell, if you aren’t interested in answering my questions, I fail to see why you requested...

MOTHERWELL: Brother.

HERMANN: Pardon?


HERMANN: You’re a member of a holy order? What order?

MOTHERWELL: The Sylvan Order.

HERMANN: “Sylvan” as in “wooded”?

MOTHERWELL: That’s right.

HERMANN: I’m not familiar with that order.

MOTHERWELL: It’s quite small.

HERMANN: Where do you meet?

MOTHERWELL: It’s not important.

HERMANN: Would you like to tell me about that book you were found with?

MOTHERWELL: It’s not important.

HERMANN: It looks important.

MOTHERWELL: It’s a prayer book.

HERMANN: It didn’t look like a prayer book.

MOTHERWELL: There are many types of worship, Dr. Gottlieb.

(beat)

HERMANN: Let me ask again. Why did you kidnap Tessa Hall?

MOTHERWELL: Let me say again. You know why.

HERMANN: Because of the cabin. The symbols.

MOTHERWELL: (darkly) Yes.

HERMANN: (sound of chair scraping closer) The thing is, Brother Robert, I don’t know why. I don’t know what it means. You have to explain it to me.

MOTHERWELL: (quietly) Think, Hermann Gottlieb... You are a lonely man. You like to be alone. But not always. I know there are times when you wished you weren’t so very... alone.

Do you ever think, in those lonely moments, when it’s just you and the darkness... Have you ever felt an other?

HERMANN: Another what?
MOTHERWELL: Not another. An other.

(beat)

HERMANN: (...) No.

MOTHERWELL: You have been watched, Hermann. All your life, you have been watched. Since you were a boy. You know this.

HERMANN: Brother Robert, if you aren’t going to answer my questions, I will end this interview. It will not air. And I know you want it to be aired. For the last time, tell me why you kidnapped Tessa Hall.

MOTHERWELL: (quietly) You know. Think of what she can do. Think of her gift. Is it so different from your own?

HERMANN: And what gift is that?

MOTHERWELL: (almost whispering) Your refusal to connect the dots will be your undoing, Hermann.

HERMANN: (sound of chair, standing up) One last thing—why did you insist on speaking with me in particular? Why not the police?

MOTHERWELL: The police haven’t seen what you’ve seen. They don’t have all the pieces that need to be fit together.

HERMANN: You’ve been listening to too many podcasts.

MOTHERWELL: And you are not listening. You have all the pieces. That’s why they’re watching you.

HERMANN: Who.

MOTHERWELL: The Advocate.

( end of tape)

NEWT: (...)

HERMANN: (...)

NEWT: Who is the Advocate?

HERMANN: I’ve no idea.

NEWT: (concerned) He was talking like he knew you.

HERMANN: He’s obviously a madman. Maybe he’s obsessed with my work. Or yours.

NEWT: (incredulous) So that’s your theory? Just a madman?

HERMANN: (snapping) I’m sorry, was “Opening a portal to hell” a more plausible scenario to you?

NEWT: Well?

HERMANN: Look. Here’s my theory. Robert Motherwell believes he can open some kind of
interdimensional portal to Hell. He believes for some reason that Tessa Hall holds the key. But obviously, he’s wrong. Tessa Hall wasn’t the key to opening any portals to Hell, well, because nothing happened. The cabin is still there. There’s no fiery maw with demons pouring out of it into our world. There’s nothing. Because science does not work that way.

NEWT: That we know of.

HERMANN: Newton, I don’t know how to state this any more clearly. None of this is real. You are listening to the ramblings of a madman.

NEWT: You really believe that? That he’s crazy?

HERMANN: ...Yes.

NEWT: Then what about what he said about you being watched?

HERMANN: (...)

NEWT (VO): Because, well, Hermann had brought that up with me already. When we come back: the rest of our interview from his office. Stay with us.

SPONSOR BREAK #1

NEWT (VO): I had just come face to face with Dr. G for the first time in six months. His office was a crazy mess, and his hair was too. I was a little shaken up myself. I had a lot of questions. After I semi-politely declined his request for me to stop recording, I asked him where he’d been, and what he’d been doing.

HERMANN: Go ahead. Ask your questions.

NEWT: And then?

HERMANN: And then I have an appointment in Westfield.

NEWT: ...So. Where the hell have you been?

HERMANN: (...)

NEWT: (clears throat) Okay. Sorry. I shouldn’t expect you to give a direct answer to such a broad question. That’s on me.

HERMANN: (upset) Newton...

NEWT: (pulling himself together) No. No. It’s fine. (clears throat) Here it is—first question. Did you find Vanessa?

HERMANN: No.

NEWT: Have you seen her?

HERMANN: No.

NEWT: Have you been in touch with her?

HERMANN: No. When I got to Florida, the postmistress shared security footage with me. There
was a visible license plate. The police found the car a few hours later, abandoned a few miles away. It had been reported stolen the day before.

NEWT: And the trail went cold after that?

HERMANN: Yes.

NEWT: Okay... So what’s all... this?

HERMANN: This is...

(beat)

NEWT: Still think the tapes aren’t connected?

HERMANN: This has nothing to do with your tapes.

NEWT: I thought they were your tapes.

HERMANN: This is different.

NEWT: What is it, then? I see Vanessa. I also see Father Dirac. What’s the connection there? And what are you doing with a photo of Sexy George Clooney on your wall? How did you find him?

HERMANN: Who?

NEWT (VO): Last December, I was approached in a cafe by a mysterious and implausibly handsome stranger. He said a bunch of cryptic nonsense, took Hermann’s coffee, and left. For six months, we’ve been unable to identify this man.

So imagine my surprise when, upon entering Hermann’s nest of madness, I saw a photo of him tacked on the wall.

NEWT: That photo.

HERMANN: (sound of turning in chair) Him?

NEWT: Who is he?

HERMANN: His name is Mark Roth. He’s the CEO of the Roth Corporation, or Rothco. It’s a conglomerate I’ve been... looking into. Why?

NEWT: That’s the guy. The guy from the cafe. Sexy George Clooney.

HERMANN: That.... That was the man?

NEWT: Yes.

HERMANN: The one who took my coffee cup?

NEWT: Yes.

HERMANN: Newton, you’re absolutely certain?

NEWT: Yes. I would not forget a face like that. Who is he? Why is he up there?

HERMANN: (...) You’re still recording?
NEWT: Yes.

HERMANN: I... I am concerned about sharing this information “on air,” as it were. It’s... private.

NEWT: (...)

HERMANN: (reluctantly) ...For some time I have been aware that I am a... person of interest to certain groups.

NEWT: (quickly) What groups?

HERMANN: (frustrated) I don’t know.

NEWT: Rothco?

HERMANN: Maybe. But I have suspected that I am... under surveillance. In a manner of speaking. Being followed. Or courted. By a group, or groups, seeking certain artifacts or information. Things that would have been in my father’s possession before he died.

NEWT: Your father the... artifact collector?

HERMANN: Correct.

NEWT: Do you have these artifacts?

HERMANN: No. But these persons or groups seem to think I have information about their whereabouts.

NEWT: What makes you think you’re being followed? Have there been... incidents?

HERMANN: I am not comfortable sharing that on air.

NEWT: Okay... So what kinds of artifacts are we talking about? Are they right? Do you have that information?

HERMANN: No. I know nothing.

NEWT: Okay...

HERMANN: If I am a target, my family members are as well. Anyone associated with my father might be. Or even myself. For this reason I have... distanced myself from them.

NEWT: From who? Your family?

HERMANN: From everyone.

NEWT: Oh. (skeptical) Okay.

HERMANN: It’s likely they’re monitoring this podcast as well.

NEWT: Probably.

HERMANN: If you really believe Mark Roth was the one you saw in that cafe...

NEWT: He was.

HERMANN: That is both disturbing and reassuring. It means I’m on the right trail. I must admit, I
wish I wasn’t.

NEWT: Why would these people be after your family?

HERMANN: I... I believe for the artifacts my father dealt in.

NEWT: You can’t think of any other reason?

HERMANN: Are you asking about something in particular?

NEWT: Are you avoiding something in particular?

HERMANN: *warningly* Newton.

NEWT: I feel like there’s something you’re not sharing.

HERMANN: There isn’t.

NEWT: You can’t make me wait forever, Hermann.

HERMANN: (...)

(pause)

NEWT: ...You said you needed my help.

HERMANN: Yes.

NEWT: With this?

HERMANN: Yes.

NEWT: Is that why you’re... back?

HERMANN: *You’re* the one who broke into my office.

NEWT: *blunt* Right. And you’re talking to me. So? You need my help?

HERMANN: I’ve... hit a dead end.

NEWT: With... all this?

HERMANN: Yes. *sounding weary* I thought you or... Mako could help me research, look online, follow these threads.

NEWT: Which threads, exactly?

HERMANN: *quietly* Will you help me, or not?

NEWT: What about Marian? Can’t she help?

HERMANN: I’d like to keep her out of this. You and I, we...

(pause...)

NEWT: *also quiet*... Yeah.
HERMANN: So you’ll do it?

NEWT: Yes. Of course I'll help.

(Interlude music #5)

NEWT (VO): Dr. Gottlieb said there was something else he wanted to show me. I would have to come up to his house, sometime that week.

It was strange, seeing him again after all that time. Things definitely felt different.

Maybe we were both different now. I don’t know.

SPONSOR BREAK #2

(Sound of front door opening)

NEWT: Hi. You’re looking better.

HERMANN: Yes, last night I slept much better than I have been, lately. Come in.

NEWT: (Stepping in) Wish I could say the same. (Sound of front door closing) This place is beautiful.

HERMANN: It’s certainly something.

NEWT (VO): Dr. Gottlieb invited me up to his parents’ old house in Lincoln, about forty minutes north of the city. He actually inherited it years ago, when his father Lars died. But it’s stood empty most of that time. He recently moved back in, and invited me up to show me something, something he said was pertinent to his “investigation.”

The house was beautiful. It was sited on a slope above a wide field bordered by stone walls and dark woods. His house was old and huge, and quite drafty, for late May. The halls were spacious and clean, but mostly empty. Each room had a cluster of neatly-labeled boxes on the hardwood floor. What little furniture there was, it was still covered with plastic.

I wouldn’t say it felt haunted. But it did feel hollow. It felt too vast and echoey to have ever been a happy home.

NEWT: (Distantly) Move-in seems to be going well.

HERMANN: (Down the hall) Yes. Marian has been advising me on how to redecorate.

NEWT: I bet she knows some stuff.

(Sound of door opening)

HERMANN: Quite. Please, sit. I’ll have to look through these boxes to find what I’m looking for.

NEWT: (Sitting down) Which is what, exactly?

(Sound of tape being ripped off cardboard)

HERMANN: Are you recording?
NEWT: Always.

(sound of objects being shifted around)

HERMANN: I understand you were frustrated about the lack of detail in my... investigation. The one we discussed the other day.

NEWT: Mhm?

HERMANN: I’d like to give you another angle to approach from.

NEWT: Sounds like an olive branch.

(shifting stops)

HERMANN: (...) Do we need one?

NEWT: (makes a noncommittal noise)

(shifting resumes)

NEWT: I do appreciate the journalistic consideration.

HERMANN: I’m glad.

NEWT: (looking) Is that just a box full of black tapes?

HERMANN: Yes.

NEWT (VO): Dr. Gottlieb was digging through a cardboard box marked “Unsolved,” taking them out and stacking them as he searched. It was strange to see them like that, so informally. Just packed in a cardboard box—stacked on a hardwood floor—the now-famous tapes. A year ago, that’s all they were to me. A random collection of tapes. And now... Well.

HERMANN: Here—I’ve found it.

NEWT: Oh. Sweet.

NEWT (VO): We went to the living room, where we spent about half an hour trying to hook up the VHS to the TV. There was no couch, so we sat on crates. Dr. G put the tape into the player. The label was “Karla.”

(interlude music #2)

NEWT (VO): Close listeners may remember the Karla tape from last season. They may in fact remember Dr. Gottlieb denying he had any such tape. Here’s the audio from season one.

(audio from episode six plays)

CAITLIN LIGHTCAP: Ask him to watch the Karla tape.

NEWT: The Karla tape?

LIGHTCAP: Yes.
NEWT: What’s on there?

LIGHTCAP: I won’t say more. That’s for Dr. Gottlieb to explain.

(...) 

NEWT: She told me to ask you about a certain tape.

HERMANN: A tape?

NEWT: “Karla.” She said you would know what that meant.

HERMANN: I’m afraid I don’t.

NEWT: You sure?

HERMANN: Quite.

NEWT (VO): So you can imagine my surprise when he queued it up without comment.

NEWT: (incredulous) Hermann, I seem to remember you saying...

HERMANN: Yes. I know.

NEWT: (sighs quietly)

(click)

(tape begins playing)

(static)

(static resolves into a voice—a young boy)

BOY: Where? Show me.

GIRL: Right there.

(clunk sound on mic)

BOY: I don’t see anything.

NEWT (VO): The footage was dark, and very grainy. It’s nighttime. It’s hard to tell, but it looks like they’re in an enclosed porch or sunroom. There’s a boy and a girl. She’s young, about seven or eight. We can’t see the boy. He sounds younger.

He’s holding the video camera, pointing at the girl. She’s leaning against the glass doors, breathing steam circles onto the glass and then wiping them away.

BOY: Karla, where is it?

(squeaky sound of hand wiping glass)

KARLA: Out there.

BOY: But where? I can’t see it. I can’t see it on the camera either.
KARLA: It’s not one where. There’s a bunch of them.

BOY: A bunch of what?

KARLA: Tall men.

BOY: (frustrated) I don’t see them.

NEWT (VO): The camera jerks and the boy moves towards the door. He slides it open. All we see is black.

(rubbery squeak sound of sliding door opening)

(quiet wind)

(wind)

KARLA: You shouldn’t have opened it.

BOY: There’s nothing out there.

KARLA: They’re not out there.

BOY: But you said...

KARLA: ...Anymore.

BOY: (...)

(squeaky hand-on-glass sound)

KARLA: You opened the door. They came inside.

(camera clunk sound)

KARLA: They’re in here now.

(someone gasps)

(click—tape ends)

NEWT (VO): Right as she says “They’re in here now,” Karla points at something behind the boy. Karla definitely looks like she’s looking at something. High up near the ceiling.

He turns the camera around to see, and gasps. But when the camera turns to that corner, well...

NEWT: ...There was nothing there.

HERMANN: (...)

NEWT: I mean. It’s a creepy video, but... I don’t exactly see how it’s black tape material. It’s just one kid scaring another kid. Am I missing something?

HERMANN: I can see how it would look that way.
NEWT: Who was Karla?

HERMANN: Karla was a childhood friend.

NEWT: A childhood...of yours? (astonished) Hermann, did you make this?

HERMANN: Yes.

NEWT: (still shocked) That was you, filming?

HERMANN: Yes.

NEWT: How old were you when you made this?

HERMANN: About five.

NEWT: (unconcealed fondness breaking through) No accent yet?

HERMANN: I was packed off to boarding school soon after this.

NEWT: ...Can I ask again why this tape is unresolved? I didn’t see anything unexplained...

HERMANN: I did.

NEWT: (quickly) You saw something? In that room?

HERMANN: ...I thought I did.

NEWT: But there’s nothing on camera.

HERMANN: Yes. There was nothing there. But what Karla claimed to see, I... Well. There’s lots of research explaining visions. There are many ways the brain tricks you into thinking you see something. But there are few reputable studies on shared hallucinations.

NEWT: Folie à deux?

HERMANN: The closest explanation, yes, is something called shared psychotic disorder. But this does not really occur among children. Even if it did, we did not fit the profile—my friend would have had to be quite dominant over me. She was a bit older, but otherwise...

(beat)

NEWT: What did you see?

HERMANN: ...It was nothing.

NEWT: Nothing?

HERMANN: Nothing. I don’t remember.

NEWT: How did you two know each other?

HERMANN: She lived in Lincoln.

NEWT: Where is Karla now?

HERMANN: I don’t know. Please don’t try to find her.
NEWT: So how did Caitlin Lightcap know about this video?

HERMANN: (sighs) This tape was among my father’s books in his office at the university when he died. I was out of the country at the time. The university auctioned off some of his belongings, and Lightcap was at the auction. She won a box of his books. This tape was with them. When I came back, she sent it to the Institute.

NEWT: That was... nice of her?

HERMANN: Yes.

NEWT: But you don’t seem to get along now.

HERMANN: Because we didn’t make small talk at the police station in Westfield?

NEWT: Yes.

HERMANN: It’s my belief Lightcap sent this tape to me as a way of... challenging me. I think it was her way of saying she believes my “mission” to debunk the paranormal stems from an insecurity about this incident from my childhood.

NEWT: But it doesn’t. Stem from that.

HERMANN: Of course not.

NEWT: That would be ridiculous. So what does this have to do with the rest of your investigation?

HERMANN: I don’t know. But I thought you’d want to see it.

NEWT (VO): I drove back to the studio feeling strange. That tape gave me an eerie feeling. Not because of what was on it—but because of the way Hermann talked about it. It was the first time I had ever seen him express doubt. Doubt about his mission, about the truth in his own eyes.

Seeing his childhood home was also something. As he showed me out, I think I spotted the room where he and Karla saw whatever they saw. It was a screened porch off the back living room. It gave me a chill.

——— OFF THE RECORD ————

(Driving, highway sounds. Radio is playing quietly. Someone is crying.)

(crying continues)

(car honks)

(Sobs slow down. Sniffling. Flipping through radio stations.)

(sniffs loudly, then sighs.)

NEWT: (hoarsely) Okay. Okay. It’s okay.

(settles on a radio station—“Tainted Love” is playing)
NEWT: *(sings along quietly)*

---------- RESUME RECORD ----------

NEWT (VO): Back at the studio, Mako and I sat down to look at the other piece of evidence from the kidnapper: the mysterious book.

*(clicking)*

MAKO: So the police scanned all the pages in and sent them in this PDF. I’m going to forward it around to some rare books people and see if I can track down someone who can tell us more about it.

NEWT: Sounds good.

*(click)*

MAKO: So the first thing that jumps out is this... drawing of Satan on the flyleaf?

NEWT: Yeah... That’s interesting.

NEWT (VO): Indeed there was a drawing of Satan in the book. I’m not a hundred percent on my Christian iconography, but this looked like medieval Satans I’d seen. Horns, tail, funky eyebrows. Big smile.

MAKO: The words are, like Dr. G said, in Cyrillic... But not Russian. These parts look like lists to me. Or maybe songs?

NEWT: Maybe, yeah. *(intrigued)* Interesting. Didn’t he say it was a prayer book?

MAKO: Yeah.

NEWT: Wait—is that the cover?

MAKO: This? Yeah.

NEWT (VO): Mako clicked back to the first page of the PDF. The cover was dark green leather. It had no title. The bottom half was taken up with a gold lattice design, and the top half had a weird little star. It had seven points, with dots at the intersections, and it was enclosed in two concentric circles.

It looked... familiar.

NEWT: *(slowly)* This looks familiar.

MAKO: Really?

NEWT: Do we have a photo of the whole book?

MAKO: Yeah. *(clicking)* Right here. Why?

NEWT: Red inked... I’ve seen this before. We’ve seen this before.

MAKO: *(incredulous)* Have we?

NEWT: *(slowly)* Yes. This looks exactly like the book in the painting, *Il Sorriso Capovolto*. The one that’s open on the professor’s desk.
MAKO: *(disbelieving)* What...


NEWT (VO): I pulled up a high-res scan of the missing Caravaggio. I admit I’ve... spent a lot of time looking at this painting. I think the code is interesting, what can I say? I’m not a codebreaker. And I’m not really interested in opening a portal to hell, which, if you recall, is what this code purports to do.

I just... I don’t know. I find it interesting.

Well, in the painting, the book is propped open on another little stack of books. It’s small, in the middle ground of the painting. You can see one page and the front cover. It’s a dark green binding, with a gold lattice. There’s a strange little gold star design on the top part of the front cover. And the edges of the pages are inked—like gilding, but instead of gold, they’re dark red.

NEWT: Look. Green. Gold lattice. *(click, click)* Weird star thing. And the pages...

MAKO: *(realizing)* Red inked. Just like the one in the painting.

NEWT: *(excited, talking fast)* It’s the same. It’s the same book. It’s looking old and worse for wear maybe, but it is. Maybe another edition. Or copy. Or translation? Is this handwritten? Are we sure we don’t know anyone who can r—

MAKO: *(quickly)* Okay wait, think about what this means. If this—

NEWT: *(almost yelling)* The code!

MAKO: *(startled)* What?


*(sound of typing, clicking)*

NEWT (VO): Needless to say, I was hyped. I scrolled through the PDF, scanning quickly for the code page—believe me. I would know it if I saw it.

*(chair moving)*

*(clicking continues)*

NEWT: I don’t see it...

MAKO: I mean, think about it. Even if this is the same book, even if the code is in here, this is a Cyrillic text... The code in the painting isn’t Cyrillic.

NEWT: *(clicking, but more slowly)* Yeah...

NEWT (VO): I really hoped it was the same book. It seemed too good to be true—so maybe it was. My gut was telling me one thing... But these days, I’m sometimes not sure about trusting my gut.

I emailed my findings to the Isabella Stewart Gardner historians. It might be a crackpot theory, but they’re pretty well-disposed towards me these days. They even invited me to
a party—they’ve nearly finished restoring Landscape with Obelisk to its original frame, and the gallery re-opening is coming up soon.

It’s been a while since I went to a fancy museum party. I don’t know if I have a black enough tie.

NEWT (VO): I went back through the PDF and looked again. Nothing jumped out as being the Capovolto Code, translation or otherwise; like Mako said, though, I probably wouldn’t recognize it in this other language.

I did find one interesting thing. Between pages 56 and 57 of the PDF, there’s a torn edge in the binding. The pages themselves are not numbered in the actual book. But it looks to me like a page was removed—fairly carefully. There’s only a little tear left.

We’ll need an expert’s opinion on the book, though. Someone who can actually authenticate, and read it. The search is on.

In the meantime, another search was gaining ground.

(Skype ringing sound)

(call connect sound)

MAKO: Hello?

BECKET: Hey, Mako.

MAKO: (warmly) Hey Raleigh. I didn’t expect to hear back from you so soon.

BECKET: (faux suave) What can I say? That’s just how we do it at the BBC World Service.

NEWT (VO): Reporter extraordinaire Raleigh Becket called Mako up. I was taking a break room couch nap at the time, and Mako didn’t wake me. Guess she thought I needed the sleep, or something.

He gave Mako his first update.

BECKET: So I don’t have anything definitive yet. I haven’t found anyone who actually remembers seeing Hawking. It was almost a year ago. But I do have an idea of why he might have come here—so while I keep looking for him, I thought you guys might be able to follow this thread.

MAKO: That’s great. Hit me.

BECKET: A crypt.

MAKO: A crypt.

BECKET: Yes. Here in Limoges. It’s all that’s left of the Abbey of Saint Martial, which was built in the 9th century and destroyed in the 19th. The crypt houses the bones of Saint Martial, first Bishop of Limoges, who the monastery was named for.

MAKO: Ah. A monastery.

BECKET: Yes. A monastery. Just like Hawking’s email said.

MAKO: Huh.
BECKET: Like I said, the crypt is all that’s left—there’s not much to see. So I don’t know why he was here, but...

MAKO: But you’ll keep looking.

BECKET: You know I will.

NEWT (VO): We asked Dr. G if he knew anything about this crypt or monastery, and he said no. But he offered to put us in touch with a friend who studied medieval monasticism.

Next month, we dig into the Abbey of Saint Martial and its monastic mysteries. We’ll have the first of my sleep notes, Rothco, and more on Dr. Gottlieb’s mysterious childhood.

It’s the Black Tapes Podcast. I’m Newt Geiszler. See you next month.

(music fades out)

“Oh—I almost forgot.”

Newt stopped just inside the front door. Hermann paused, hand on the handle.

Newt opened his messenger bag and rummaged inside. “I wanted to give this... back to you...”

As he felt around between folders and crumpled receipts, his eyes slid through the door to the living room. An ottoman, a few neat cardboard boxes. One box was labeled Records. Newt felt a twist of longing as he looked at the box, at the old record player beside it. His hand closed around what he was looking for in his bag.

“Here. You left this scarf in my office in, like, December?” He said it thoughtfully, as if he didn’t know quite when, and as if he hadn’t given it much thought since then. “I wanted to make sure you got it back.”

Newt held out the scarf.

Hermann took it, meeting his eyes for a brief second. “Thank you.” The soft cable knit threaded through Newt’s hand and away. Then it was gone, and Newt was saying goodbye and getting in his car and bumping down the long dirt driveway, tall green sunlit fields of grass sliding by on either side and birds swooping in the sunset and he was crying, crying for no reason at all.

He had found Hermann’s scarf in the studio in December. He’d left it there on the day of their visit to Rainsford Island. Newt had texted him about it, actually. It was one of the last texts in their thread:

Newt: [attached image] Lonely scarf found in Studio B. Seeking owner, or someone to love.

Hermann: Thank you. I have been looking for that. Remind me to pick it up when I come in tomorrow.

Newt: No prob.

But with everything that had happened the next day, the scarf had stayed, forgotten, on the back a chair. For the next six months Newt had kept it on the hook on the back of his office door. It was an ordinary machine knit scarf, blue and gray striped; classy, like Hermann; a little grandpa-ish, like
Hermann.

In the intervening months, when Newt zoned out, he would often stare at the scarf like he was looking out a window. He never took it home, never really touched it. It just hung there like the flag of a forgotten nation. Some days, his leather jacket hung on the hook next to it, and the casual pairing’s simulated domesticity tore his stomach up.

Newt turned onto the paved road, blinking away the pointless tears in the harsh sunlight. He didn’t like driving, but ritzy Lincoln left him no choice, so Mako’d lent him her car. The road took him to Route 128, where with a shuddering sigh he joined the evening traffic homebound.

He felt hungover or just-post-punch-drunk.

He felt weird, he felt unreal.

He had been like a ghost in that big house.

For the fiftieth time that week, he recalled seeing Hermann again in his thread-webbed office.

He heard him before he appeared—“It’s alright, Marian.”

Newt’s mouth went numb.

For a second, he was so overwhelmed by the sound of that voice that he did not match it to the silhouette that replaced Marian in the doorway. The silhouette was bent, dark, impossibly tall, gripping the door frame. It seemed to loom over him from an impossible height, even from the other side of the room. Then the distance snapped to nothing and the shape resolved to Hermann and it was Hermann, Hermann, standing right there.

He looked exhausted. His hair was unkempt and untrimmed. There were stray hairs poking out of his jaw and each one was another ringing knock on Newt’s ribcage. Every wrinkle in his rumpled shirt was one note lower on the sinking ship quartet that had started playing when Newt saw the red thread thumbtack web.

His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows and his top button was undone. The sight did undignified but unsurprising things to Newt’s stomach.

Newt stared magnetically. He felt dizzy. Looking into those eyes was terrifying—they were heavy-lidded, half dead. But he couldn’t stop looking. It was like he had wandered out of the desert and stumbled into a deep blue lake. Damned if he was going to take a quick drink.

He was going to dive.

“Hello, Newton,” Hermann said at last.

His voice was low, with a hollow ring of resignation.

“Hermann,” he said. The word escaped him with no conscious input.

Hermann stepped into the room and all thoughts about diving evaporated instantly. He stepped from dream into Newt’s real, physical space, and Newt froze. Tension seized him.

After all this time—no. No. He couldn’t. If Hermann came one step closer, he would scream. He would.

Hermann kept walking.
Newt didn’t scream.

“I’ve been trying to get in touch,” Newt said, throwing the words out between them like a useless obstruction.

“I know,” said Hermann, stopping.

“It’s...Um. Important,” said Newt, his reassuring gift for discourse failing him at last.

“Newton.” Hermann said it like he hadn’t heard a thing.

“...Yeah?”

“I need your help.”

Newt was stopped in Route 128 traffic and he was crying again, sobbing this time. Behind his eyelids the windows of the Lincoln house paraded past, framing soft green grass and dark trees beyond. A house in which he didn’t belong, a house of rooms he’d never see, a house with a turntable he would never put a record onto. And that was fine. It was all fine, he would cry it out and then go home and sleep and it would all be fine.

Six months was a long time. A long time to think of someone without seeing them. A long time to imagine and forget and recreate.

Newt clamped his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut. Sobs shushed out from between his gritted teeth.

Someone honked. He opened his eyes. He let the car roll forward a few yards. In the line drive shot of late afternoon sunlight, they were stalled beside a vast marsh, half in shadow. A one half-fallen tree, leaves still green, leaned over the water. Newt admired the tree for a moment, sniffing and wiping his eyes. Traffic rolled forward. He turned on the radio.

“Oh, okay. It’s okay,” he said softly to himself.

With a sniff, he flipped through the stations.

It wasn’t over. That was what he’d been so afraid of, he realized—that Hermann had genuinely disappeared forever. He wiped the last tears away, breathing returning slowly to normal. So it wasn’t over. He was back.

It was different now; maybe it always would be.

Now, they would find out what that meant.

He paused on WERS, then decided he wasn’t in the mood for college radio. 92.9 was playing “Tainted Love” and he smiled, wiping his eyes. The song always made him think of that Christmas party at the Columbia radio station. His first radio job. His first college party makeout. Where was Tim now, he wondered.

He sang along quietly, wondering what records Hermann had in that box. Since he would never know, he felt free to speculate. Probably symphonies, concertos. Definitely some opera. Maybe New Order, or Lou Reed. In this fantasy, Newt decided that Hermann had, in college, been cool for about ten minutes and bought a New Order record. Maybe he’d kept it all these years despite himself.

“For I toss and turn,” Newt sang along quietly, “I can't sleep at night...”
Happy holidays y'all!

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SEASON 2, EPISODE 3: THE CEONOPHUS

PUB 25 JULY 2013

(familiar theme music: acoustic guitar, church bells, a faraway female voice)

VOICEOVER: Welcome to Season Two of The Black Tapes Podcast. This season, we’re continuing our exploration of belief and the search for truth, and our profile of the enigmatic Dr. Hermann Gottlieb. We are examining his collection of unsolved cases, pursuing the theory that they are connected.

Our story progresses in order, week by week. So, if you’re a first-time listener, welcome to the show! You’ll have to start at episode one if you want to have the faintest idea what I’m talking about.

(interlude music #4)

(fuzzy, static sounds—resolve to fabric shifting)

(someone sighs)

NEWT: (hoarse, groggy) Gooood morning Vietnam. It’s bright and... early on Tuesday, and according to my timekeeper, the hour is 3:55 AM. You know what they say, kids. The early bird would have really liked those three to four more hours of sleep.

(still speaking quietly into recorder) I’ve been awake for about twenty minutes, trying to get back to sleep. No such luck. I fell asleep around... 2. I’ve been listening to one of those podcasts that help you... sleep. It does help me fall asleep, but...

So, a big one and a half hours of sleep on the clock for tonight.

I’m sorry, Dr. Mitchell. Negative language.

Or rather, positive language, said in groggy sarcasm.

Negatively said.

(...)  

(still murmuring) I think I woke up because I was having a dream. I remembered it when I first woke up, then it disappeared. I don’t usually remember my dreams. But this one came back... for whatever reason. I was in a field, maybe a prairie. I just remember grass. I was following someone. I might have been a bloodhound. Or maybe I was following a bloodhound. Then I felt a tap on my shoulder.
Someone is trying to wake me up, I thought. My mind said, it’s your roommate, something’s wrong. I felt the tap again. I woke up.

I haven’t had a roommate in about ten years. I remembered this once my eyes were open. I live alone.

Just a dream, I thought. But I couldn’t shake the feeling, the memory, the impression, like—like someone had just touched me there. It felt like there was still an indent in my shoulder.

Then I felt it again.

Someone tapped my shoulder.

I woke up that time. For real. The clock said 3:34. No one was standing over my bed trying to wake me.

(sighs)

Still... creepy dream.

NEWT (VO): Welcome back. That was, as you probably surmised, one of my “sleep notes.” My sleep doctor, as part of my insomnia treatment, suggested I start keeping a sleep journal. Being me, I decided to do it in audio format. I’ll probably play a few more as the season goes on.

You know. For the personal color. Since normally, I’m so unpersonal and hard to read.

Lots of investigative work this episode. We have more on the case of the Gottlieb family, the Abbey of Saint Martial, and Rothco. First, we have an update from our foreign correspondent and hunk-at-large, Raleigh Becket in Europe. Mako and I checked in with him via Skype.

MAKO: Hey, Raleigh.

BECKET: (tinny through laptop speaker) Hey Mako. Hi Newt.

NEWT: Heyo.

MAKO: Where are you right now?

BECKET: I’m in Cluny. A few hours northeast of Limoges.

MAKO: Did you finally pick up Hawking’s trail?

BECKET: I did. I tracked someone down in Limoges who recognized him—the train station ticket clerk. Lucky for us, she’s one of those face-memory people. She said he bought a ticket to Cluny. So here I am. I’m having a bit more luck here.

MAKO: That’s great. What have you found?

BECKET: Well, as it happens, Cluny is home to another abbey.

NEWT: Of course it is.

BECKET: To be fair, France, as a nation, is crawling with abbeys. So, this one is also dissolved, but it’s still standing. There’s still a few buildings, and a museum. I checked it out.
The Monastery at Cluny was founded in 910 by a pious duke who donated the land. When he founded it, he declared Cluny free of local governmental or noble jurisdiction. The only authority that could control it was the Pope.

MAKO: Wow.

BECKET: Yeah. That gave it a lot of independence, for the tenth century. The Cluny monastery welcomed pilgrims, wanderers, wild men, the poor, the destitute, deserters. Outside, the chaos of the era. Inside, holiness and peace.

Apparently, the “thing” at Cluny was singing. It was the tenth century, and everyone was gearing up for the millennium—judgment day, all that. Cluny was doing its best to get as close to heaven as possible. To imitate life in heaven, they imitated the choirs of angels. They sang every hour of every day, in praise of the Lord. The chanting never stopped. Myth has it that one monk hit the singing trance so hard, he started to levitate.

MAKO: Sounds fascinating.

BECKET: It’s a pretty neat place. It survived a long time, but it was mostly destroyed during the Revolution.

MAKO: So did anyone recognize Tomás?

BECKET: Yeah, they did. They said he came by, and asked a lot of questions. He got an appointment with one of the actual historians.

NEWT: What did he ask about?

BECKET: Well, the historian said he was a weirdo. She said he mostly asked about a monk named Adémar. Adémardede Chabannes.

NEWT: Did the historian know who that was?

BECKET: Yeah—apparently he was a famous forger. But he never came to Cluny, as far as she knew. Hawking also asked about an obelisk. That reminded me of your painting.

MAKO: Yeah... Interesting.

NEWT: So what’s next?

BECKET: Well, I tried the train station again but no luck tracing him that way. So I’m going to try some more... back-door methods. Might cash in a favor with a hacker I know.

NEWT: Becket. You can’t just say stuff like that. Ugh. You know a hacker who owes you a favor?

MAKO: (to Newt) Don’t worry. I’m sure the “hacker” is just his cousin.

BECKET: (laughs) I’m afraid I’m not at liberty to reveal my sources.

NEWT (VO): Becket kept tracking Tomás down while we waited for Dr. Gottlieb’s monastic scholar to call us back. We’ll have that interview later on.

(interlude music #3)

Last time, Dr. G shared a tape with us called “Karla.” It was from his own childhood. He was five when he filmed it.
While nothing unusual appears on the tape itself, Dr. G says he saw something that night. The same thing as his “friend,” baby paranormal investigator Karla.

He claimed that he did not know where Karla was now. Unfortunately for him, but fortunately for us, his last name isn’t terribly common. So one fairly cursory Google search later...

NEWT: Hi. Is this Karla?

KARLA: (through phone) (German accent) Is this Newton? From NPR?

NEWT: Yes. Please, call me Newt. Are you comfortable with me recording this conversation?

KARLA: Yes, certainly.

NEWT: Would you like to introduce yourself to the audience?

KARLA: (stiff, quiet sigh) My name is Karla Krasner. I changed my name when I was married. My given name was Karla Gottlieb.

NEWT: You’re Hermann’s sister.

KARLA: Yes. Hermann is my little brother.

(Interlude music #6)

NEWT (VO): Despite Hermann’s request, I found Karla. I reached out to her via email. She and I discussed his concerns, about the people interested in their family, and she said she did not care. She said whoever they were, they would likely already know who and where she was. Karla wanted to share her story.

(Interlude music #6 fades out)

NEWT: So, when you told me this via email, I was a little shocked. Dr—Hermann has never mentioned having a sister.

KARLA: Hermann is strange about things like that. I think if you had never asked, he could be your friend for life and never tell you one thing about his childhood. Our childhood.

NEWT: So, you sound a lot more German than your brother. You live in Germany now, is that right?

KARLA: Yes. I have lived most of my life here. We were both born in Germany. When I was five, and Hermann was two, we moved to America. I never quite assimilated, and when I was ten, I went back. For school. My father preferred that I be educated in Germany. Except for holidays in Massachusetts, I never really left again.

NEWT: Huh. But Hermann went to boarding school in England, didn’t he?

KARLA: That’s right. Our mother was English. She chose this for him. It was a point of contention between our parents. Just one of many.

NEWT: Do you and Hermann no longer speak?

KARLA: ...It has been a long time.
NEWT: Is Hermann estranged from your family?

KARLA: No, not really. But we haven’t seen him in a long time.

NEWT: Do you think there’s a reason for that?

KARLA: I think my brother is a private person. Perhaps to the point of his own detriment. ...But perhaps a better word would be sequestered. I mean this as, he sequesters his personal life and his work life from each other. He would not tell you, a colleague—I suppose—about his home life, just as he would not tell me, his sister, about his work.

Of course, such a split of the self is not truly possible. But he wishes it. When he was beginning his Institute, it seemed that every time we spoke, he had less to say about it. Eventually he told me nothing.

NEWT: So why did your family move to Lincoln?

KARLA: Our father was very absent. He traveled a lot for work. When we were small, much of his business was in America, on the Eastern Seaboard. So he and my mother decided to move there. They found a quiet place in a beautiful town.

NEWT: It’s a lovely home.

KARLA: You have seen it?

NEWT: Yes. Just once.

KARLA: It is as empty as it is splendid. This was what we discovered. Even with two small children, Lars could not be bothered to spend more than a few days a month at home.

NEWT: (thoughtful) Mm. And what was it that your father did, exactly?

KARLA: He never talked with me about it. I was given to understand that he dealt in antiques. Curiosities.

NEWT: What gave you that understanding?

KARLA: When he came home, he brought us little gifts. From abroad. When we lived in America, I would always hope for something from Germany, my home. I missed it terribly. When I was young, these gifts made him a hero to me, like a fantasy person, a, a fae.

NEWT: But when you were older...?

KARLA: I grew to mistrust him. And Hermann, he never trusted him.

NEWT: Why is that?

KARLA: I don’t know, exactly. But I remember how it was when we were children. Father would come home for one of his rare visits. I would be ecstatic. Maybe because having him there was more like home, more like Germany. (soft irony) Maybe because I am a materialist, and Hermann is not. But from a young age he seemed to sense that our father was trying to buy his love. For some reason I could not say, Hermann decided he would not allow it.

NEWT: He doesn’t talk about your father often. But it seems like they had a distant relationship.

KARLA: I would not call it distant. At times it was very close. There is a closeness in resentment.
NEWT: (...)

NEWT: ...You’re quite different from your brother.

KARLA: (laugh) He does not know you are speaking with me. I can tell.

NEWT: (laugh, slightly nervous) You’re right.

KARLA: What makes you say this?

NEWT: You’re just so much more open. About the family.

KARLA: I’ve had a lot of time to think these things over. And I have a happier family now.

NEWT: When was the last time you and Hermann spoke?

KARLA: Must be ten years. Maybe eleven.

NEWT: Around the time Vanessa disappeared?

KARLA: Yes... Yes. He withdrew very far after she disappeared. I thought he would come back to us, you know. But he never did.

(pause)

NEWT: Did you know Vanessa well?

KARLA: Not well, no. They were married seven years before she vanished. We got along, but I never... She never warmed up to me. She was not cold. But I never got to know her. (...) It made me hesitate to trust her.

NEWT: (carefully) Did you ever suspect that Hermann... had anything to do with her disappearance?

KARLA: No... My brother is not that kind of man. He would not hurt someone. Especially someone who trusted him. But... Well. You see, that is not his way of being angry.

NEWT: What do you mean?

KARLA: He will not lash out. He will just withdraw. Maybe you will not ever know that he was angry. This was what happened to us.

NEWT: That must have been difficult.

KARLA: It was.

NEWT: Before he stopped keeping in touch, did you know about his suspicions? His suspicions about your family being followed?

KARLA: In a way, I sensed this. But he never told me outright. He began to distance himself, and I could tell it was for a reason, a reason he would not say. He acted as if it was a matter of personality. He put on the role of our father and tried to play it for me. So I would understand, so I would see a reason for him to withdraw. But it was just a little too convincing. Hermann is not our father.

NEWT: No?

KARLA: No. He was our father’s favorite, but this only made Hermann push him away. Perhaps
Hermann’s mistrust made our father more intent to win his affection in the same way. But maybe it was something else.

NEWT: Something else?

KARLA: I sometimes... Well, I sometimes had the feeling my father wanted Hermann for something specific. It seemed that there was some purpose to his interest.

NEWT: (mystified) How, exactly...?

KARLA: Well. (sighs) It was the gifts, I think. As we got older, our father would still bring me the usual—a pretty notebook, a fancy pen, a scarf. But the gifts he gave to Hermann were more... arcane. They were old books, rare archaeological items. He tried to... I don’t know, initiate Hermann into his world. I think for a moment, Hermann almost bought in.

But then our mother got sick. Herm and I came home to take care of her, but Father was away. He did not come home. She died. And Hermann never forgave Father for that.

NEWT: He blamed him?

KARLA: It was a long life of blames. This was the last.

NEWT: (...) So, the tape Hermann showed me. It was made when the two of you were children.

KARLA: Yes. I know this tape.

NEWT: Do you remember that night?

KARLA: Yes...

NEWT: But?

KARLA: Well, it was not the only time I saw these... apparitions.

NEWT: You saw them often?

KARLA: Not often. But more than once.

NEWT: Can you describe them?

KARLA: Ah yes. Because they do not appear on the tape.

NEWT: No. But you saw them?

KARLA: (assured) Yes, yes. They were there. Herm saw them too.

NEWT: He claims he doesn’t remember.

KARLA: That may be. But he did see them.

NEWT: What... were they?

KARLA: (low) Tall men.

NEWT: Many?

KARLA: Many outside. Then Herm opened the door. And one of them came in.
NEWT: Can you... describe it?

KARLA: It was tall. Maybe the tallest. Even with a hunch in its back, its head was touching the ceiling. Its face was long, but black. No features. Well, I thought it had no features. It was moving, twitching, a bit. Not twitching... it was vibrating.

Shaking its arms. Like it was excited.

NEWT: ...Oh.

KARLA: And then it smiled. And I wished it had no features. Its eyelids opened and its eyes were enormous white spheres, no pupil at all. It smiled wide, wide with all those teeth. Sharp teeth. Shiny and white, like the belly of a dead fish.

NEWT: (hushed) Wow.

KARLA: It was the only time I saw this creature so close. I’ll never forget it.

NEWT: Did anything else happen? After Hermann turned off the camera?

KARLA: I don’t know if it was before or after but... When it smiled, it was because of what it saw. It pointed. It pointed and smiled.

NEWT: At you?

KARLA: No. It pointed at Hermann.

NEWT: Oh, my god.

(pause)

KARLA: Herm became convinced that these things were after us, and our family.

NEWT: He said that to you?

KARLA: He was small. Only five. He didn’t just say it to me. He said it to our parents too.

NEWT: How did they react?

KARLA: Badly. Mother pretended she hadn’t heard. Father said he was telling ridiculous lies.

NEWT: That must have been hard for you both.

KARLA: It was.

NEWT: It seems... like this incident disturbed him a lot more than he lets on.

KARLA: Perhaps he has truly gotten past it. But I do not think so. He was so young. It is harder to forget such things, even once the details are gone. Perhaps they are gone from Hermann. But they teach you a lesson, even if you forgot how. The lesson remains.

NEWT: Did he ever talk to you about it again? As an adult?

KARLA: Of course he did not.

(pause)
KARLA: Do me a favor, Newton?

NEWT: Newt.

KARLA: Newt. Do me a favor. Ask Hermann about the boy in the pool.

NEWT: The what?

KARLA: Ask him. It’s not for me to tell.

NEWT (VO): After the break: I ask. Plus, we talk to the monastic scholar about Adémar and the crypt at Saint Martial, and dig into Rothco.

SPONSOR BREAK #1

HERMANN: (muffled through phone) I don’t have any idea what she was talking about.

NEWT (VO): I called Dr. Gottlieb to ask him some questions about what his sister told me. He was... not pleased.

NEWT: No idea? The phrase “the boy in the pool” means nothing to you?

HERMANN: (tightly) No.

NEWT: Hm.

(beat)

NEWT: So is there a reason you didn’t tell me Karla was your sister?

HERMANN: It wasn’t relevant.

NEWT: I’m... not sure I agree, Hermann. (pause) I feel like you haven’t been very honest.

HERMANN: You feel that I have been dishonest?

NEWT: (…) At least, not very forthcoming.

HERMANN: (provocative) Is that so?

NEWT: Um?

HERMANN: Newton, I asked you quite specifically not to contact Karla. As soon as you left my house you did not hesitate to track her down and record an interview.

NEWT: (…)

HERMANN: So you’ll forgive me if I fail to see how I am the untrustworthy person in this scenario.

NEWT: (defensive) Well, I mean. This is my job, Hermann. Like... why did you even show me the tape in the first place? Did you really expect me to do nothing? Just take it at face value?

HERMANN: No, but I expected you to respect my privacy.

NEWT: I’m sorry but, like I said, this is my job we’re talking about. If you’re uncomfortable with the bounds of our... agreement...
HERMANN: Do you understand that it is bigger than this? Newton? The world does not revolve around your podcast. I confessed I had been threatened and allowed you to broadcast it. Rather than take that at face value, you drag my sister into it when I specifically told you it would...

NEWT: First of all, Karla agreed to be recorded. That’s her prerogative. Second of all, Hermann, if you had been honest with me in the first place about her relationship to you, we could have discussed it! You give me nothing, then get affronted when I go behind your back for information—well I’m sorry but, if you want to control the flow of information, you have to actually give me some.

(beat)

NEWT: Hello?

NEWT (VO): He hung up on me.

Ah, just like old times.

But in all seriousness. That conversation went pretty poorly. When I talked to Karla, I felt justified. I didn’t think he would be upset, and even if he was, I didn’t think I was in the wrong.

But was I? Was my lack of sleep starting to inhibit my judgment?

I talked to Mako about it. She wasn’t so sure.

NEWT: (surprised) So you don’t think I was... being unethical?


NEWT: (small laugh)

MAKO: I’m serious, Newt. You can’t burn bridges like that. But, no. I don’t think you were wrong—or rather, we were wrong—to contact Karla.

NEWT: So you’re not worried about my sleep-deprived judgments?

MAKO: Not this one, no.

NEWT: Why not?

MAKO: I mean, you said it yourself. If he wants to control the flow of information...

NEWT: Right.

MAKO: But the thing is...

NEWT: What?

MAKO: Well, I think he does want that. This conversation makes me a little concerned that Dr. Gottlieb is trying to... manipulate the story somehow. Control it.

NEWT: (doubtful) Hmm.

MAKO: You don’t agree?

NEWT: I just don’t see why he would.
MAKO: I don’t know. We should just be more careful.

NEWT: Do you mean trusting him, or not trusting him?

MAKO: I think we need to do more of our own research.

NEWT (VO): In the meantime, I had a call with Dr. Milton Resnick.

NEWT: Hi. Is this Dr. Resnick?

RESNICK: (cheerful, English accent) It certainly is. Is this Mr. Geiszler?

NEWT: It certainly is! Thank you for giving us the time.

RESNICK: Of course, of course. Hermann is an old friend.

NEWT (VO): Dr. Milton Resnick is a professor at Oxford. He studies medieval Christian history, with a focus on the Order of Saint Benedict.

RESNICK: So Hermann tells me you’ve got some questions about the Abbey of Saint Martial in Limoges.

NEWT: That’s right. We’re trying to track someone down, and we think he visited the old crypt there, as well as the monastery at Cluny.

RESNICK: Well, Cluny was a much more significant landmark.

NEWT: Seems like our friend went there looking for a monk named “Adémar.” Apparently he was a forger of some kind. But they told him Adémar was never at Cluny.

RESNICK: (interested) Well, actually, that might not quite be true. It’s all a bit apocryphal. But I can tell you where Adémar definitely was: Limoges.

NEWT: Oh—really?

RESNICK: Really. Frère Adémar de Chabannes was a brother at the Abbey of Saint Martial.

NEWT: Oh wow. Finally, something that makes sense!

RESNICK: Adémar had quite a fascinating life, actually.

NEWT: Do tell, Dr. Resnick.

RESNICK: Adémar lived at a very interesting time in Christian history. He was born in 989. Now, the hundred years leading up to the first millennium were a time of major upheaval. Do you know why?

NEWT: Why?

RESNICK: Because the entire Christian world believed the end of days was at hand. They didn’t know exactly when, but every little thing—war, power struggles, droughts, famines, comets, storms, dreams—seemed to point to certain doom.

NEWT: Isn’t this around the time the Cluny Monastery was founded?

RESNICK: Mr. Geiszler, you do know your stuff. Yes, it was. Judgment Day anxiety was part of
the reason for its founding. But anxiety isn’t quite the right description. For some, Judgment Day was almost a welcome relief. For those who had wealth and success on Earth, perhaps not. But for those who toiled, those for whom life was suffering, or the very pious, Judgment Day was almost looked forward to. Almost like a reward. A finish line. All over Christian Europe there was this complex mixture of anticipation and fear.

So this is the world Ademar is born into. Those expecting the apocalypse to come in the year 1000 (when he was 11) were disappointed, briefly, before they set their sights on 1033. That would be the millennium of Christ’s death, rather than birth—equally viable for the arrival of the Antichrist, I suppose, in their eyes.

NEWT: Wow. That’s fascinating.

RESNICK: Indeed. Quite a time to be alive. So Adémari, a monk and a scholar, set about studying these things as well. Biblical scholars back then were rather coy about the exact date of the apocalypse, but most Christians were fairly certain it would be 1033.

NEWT: Gotcha.

RESNICK: Right. So, now, one very interesting sort of portent was reported all across the land at this time. People were having terrible nightmares about the end of days—bees, storms, disembowelment, horrible things befell them in their dreams. One thing these dreamers had in common was that they were nonbelievers. Heretics. These were non-Christians, receiving visions of a Christian end.

Adémari took a special interest in these so-called heretics. He talked about them a lot in his writings, which we still have. He wrote about them scathingly. He described the forests and fields around him as if they were teeming with heretics. He called them “Messengers of the Antichrist.” It was rather like he was obsessed with them.

NEWT: Do we know why?

RESNICK: We do. Because one night as a young man, a terrible vision came to Adémari himself.

NEWT: Oh my. Was he a heretic too?

RESNICK: It’s likely that is exactly what he was afraid of. He didn’t write about this until much later. Apparently one night, he dreamt of Christ on the cross, as tall as the sky. And Christ was weeping. His tears flowed down and became the rivers of France. This vision was so vivid it disturbed him deeply, for years afterward.

NEWT: Interesting. So, what was this about Adémari being a forger?

RESNICK: Well, yes. At that time around Limoges, there was a rumor that St. Martial was actually one of the original apostles. St. Martial, who his monastery was named for, was a 3rd century bishop. He was the one who brought Christianity to that region. His remains are buried in that crypt you mentioned. But of course, if he lived in the 3rd century, he was never an apostle of Christ.

Unless, of course, you could find documents to prove that he was actually born much earlier. Wouldn’t that be neat?

NEWT: It would be!

RESNICK: Well that’s exactly what Adémari did. He found some documents.
NEWT: By forging them, I take it?

RESNICK: Precisely. He “amassed” documents that proved his idea that St. Martial was born centuries earlier, and forged a hagiography, a *Life* of Martial to back it up. Then he invited everyone to see.

NEWT: Wow.

RESNICK: It was quite a stunt. Of course, the people of Limoges were wild for it. *Their* saint, an apostle. Imagine! They were, until it was debunked by a visiting scholar. Adémăr tried to defend himself, but it was no use. He was shouted down and run out of town.

NEWT: Ouch. Sounds rough.

RESNICK: Yes. He was absolutely disgraced. He slunk back to the abbey in defeat. But Adémăr did not back down on his theory. He doubled down on it, actually. In a frenzy of bitterness he forged *more* documents of definitive proof. He was desperate to prove his case before Judgment Day.

1033 rolled around and he left his monastery. The end was at hand—the end he had so long prepared for. He stopped at the library in Limoges, where he left his forgeries about St. Martial. He wasn’t about to give up his place in history. These papers were not debunked for over 900 years. *That’s* how good his forgeries were.

Then he joined the crowd heading east to Jerusalem for the Millennium. It’s possible he passed through Cluny on his pilgrimage.

It was a perilous journey, but he made it.

It was 1033. This was the year. This was the place.

And?

NEWT: And?

RESNICK: Why, nothing. Nothing at all. It seems it was the greatest disappointment of his life—and the last. He died in 1034. We have one of his last writings, from that year: “Come, eternal King,” he wrote. “Come and watch over your kingdom, our sacrifice, our priesthood. Come, Lord ruler; come snatch away the nations from error. Come Lord, Saviour of the world.”

NEWT: So this monk... *wanted* the world to end?

RESNICK: Yes. He wasn’t alone, either. A lot of the devout were sorely disappointed when Judgment did not come. They were ready to be judged. They felt they had prepared themselves to be exemplary, servants of heaven. And then...

NEWT: And then nothing.

RESNICK: Yes. Now, what I’ve told you so far comes from concrete sources. This would be where we get into the more... apocryphal stuff.

NEWT: That’s what I like to hear, Dr. Resnick.

RESNICK: There’s a rumor, myth more like, that Adémăr wrote another text before he died. His disappointment that the end did not arrive was profound. He had spent his whole life preparing for it. So, when it did not, he took matters into his own hands.
NEWT: How so?

RESNICK: The story goes, this book concerned the end of days—not how to prepare for it. But how to bring it about. How to invite the Antichrist into our world.

NEWT: *(emphatically)* Oh wow. That’s quite a character shift from devout monk to Antichrist-courter.

RESNICK: If I had to guess, I would say Adémar did it for two reasons. The memory of his heretical dream was nagging at him. Hounding him. Constantly. He lived in a terrible fear that there was some inherent evil in him—some dark thread, connecting him to this apocalypse. Perhaps, like one of the heretics he hated, he was a “messenger of the Antichrist,” against his own will.

And then, after his forgery humiliations, and the disappointment of 1033, he felt abandoned and betrayed by the faith he had lived to serve. He began to think, perhaps, perhaps this *was* his destiny. To be a herald. So perhaps that is why he created this book.

Adémar may have considered himself the herald of this end. The messenger who knocks at the door to let it in. And when God did not send the apocalypse...

NEWT: Adémar asked Him to?

RESNICK: No. No, no. The supplications are in the other direction.

NEWT: As in, towards Hell?

RESNICK: Supposedly, yes. Towards the devil himself.

NEWT: Hmm.

RESNICK: These days, the book is known by another name—The Ceonophus.

NEWT: *(voice of realization)* The Ceonophus. I knew I had heard of this before.

NEWT (VO): I recognized the name of the Ceonophus from my conversation with Father Dirac, last year. He told us it was a “bastardized Bible,” but other than that, the way he described it matches up almost perfectly with Dr. Resnick’s account.

We tried contacting him, again. The Church wouldn’t let us speak with him. They said it was a matter of health. They wouldn’t tell us where he was living, either.

I had a couple more questions for Dr. Resnick.

NEWT: Have you ever heard of the Capovolto Code?

RESNICK: It sounds familiar, yes?

NEWT: There’s this Caravaggio painting with a sort of... occult reputation. It’s said to be cursed.

RESNICK: Ah yes. The one with the code.

NEWT: Yes. The code that is supposedly an incantation to open portal to hell.

RESNICK: *(amused)* Yes, yes. A compelling mythology. The painting is still missing, is it not?

NEWT: Yes, it is. What I wanted to ask you was, a portal to hell incantation... How similar to the
Ceonophus does that sound?

RESNICK: Fairly similar, I suppose.

NEWT: Do you think there’s a possibility the painting is a depiction of the Ceonophus?

RESNICK: (intrigued) Interesting... Up front I’d say, almost definitely not, but I’d love to take another look at the painting.

NEWT: I’ll send it to you. (click) There we go.

RESNICK: Right... Okay, so, there’s a few reasons why not. First of all, this book is too small. The Ceonophus, if it exists, is the size of a Bible. Lots of pages.

NEWT: I see. Could it be maybe a translation? An updated edition?

RESNICK: I suppose I don’t see why not; but I also don’t see any evidence for it. I wouldn’t suggest working from that theory.

The thing to remember about the Ceonophus is, we have no reason to believe it’s real. It’s only referenced in passing in a few other texts. The only thing we know for sure about it is that it’s a popular myth. A book that could usher in the end of days? What could be more romantic? But its very existence is, if you ask me, nothing but a myth.

SPONSOR BREAK #2

NEWT (VO): Mako called me into the studio on Saturday afternoon. She said it was important.

(sound of door)

NEWT: Hey. What’s going on?

MAKO: Honestly? I’m not sure.

NEWT: Um, okay...

MAKO: In Studio C.

NEWT: Okay.

(two pairs of footsteps)

(door opens)

NEWT: Oh.

HERMANN: Newton—good. I’m glad you’re here.

NEWT (VO): Mako told me Hermann had showed up a few hours before. He had asked for access to our archive, which she’d given him. Then he had given every intern in our wing a bunch of different research tasks. After a bit he tried to get Mako and Herc, one of our executive producers, to impersonate a detective and track some license plate numbers. That was when Mako called me.
Dr. G was looking... frantic. He looked exhausted, like he had been running on caffeine alone, and was coming off it.

When he saw me, he actually looked relieved. He made no mention of our argument over the phone—it was like he had forgotten. Or didn’t care anymore. I had no idea what was going on. He pulled me over to his computer.

HERMANN: (slightly hoarse) Mark Roth is the Advocate. The one Motherwell was talking about.

NEWT: Um... Okay. What makes you think so?

HERMANN: He’s a lawyer. Or at least, he has a law degree.

(pause)

MAKO: ...And? What else? Lots of people have law degrees, Dr. Gottlieb.

NEWT: Do you think he’s the one surveilling you?

HERMANN: He was also involved in a dig outside Hillah.

NEWT: As in an archaeological dig?

HERMANN: Yes.

MAKO: In Hillah?

HERMANN: In Iraq. South of Baghdad. The dig was searching for something... something important. They filed the paperwork as if it was a predevelopment dig, as if they were planning to build something there, such as a factory or mining facility. But nothing has been built. According to my findings here... (sound of papers) ...This dig functioned as a research excavation.

NEWT: Okay. What difference does it make?

HERMANN: Projects operate under predevelopment status when they’re building something and need to “be careful” in a potentially sensitive area. In other words, they might find an artifact or ruin by accident, but they aren’t looking for one.

NEWT: And a research excavation... is looking?

HERMANN: Yes. In this case, for something specific. Something very significant.

MAKO: What makes you think so?

HERMANN: The expense, first of all. There were many far less expensive places to build in this region. This location makes very little sense for predevelopment. It isn’t near anything. There’s no evidence of oil or other mineral deposits.

NEWT: Okay...

HERMANN: But also... there’s this.

NEWT: What’s this?

HERMANN: Tiamat.
NEWT: Tiamat?

NEWT: Dr. G pulled up a photo. It was a little gray monster statue, very old. It looked a bit like a dragon—only with a lot more heads. It was... pretty creepy.

NEWT: Oh. Cool.

HERMANN: Tiamat, also known as Cthulhu, Leviathan, the Kraken. It’s an ancient myth, present in many cultures—the battle between their legendary hero and this chthonic monster.

NEWT: (...) Oh.

HERMANN: “Chthonic” means from underground. Usually the underworld.

NEWT: Right. Yes. I knew that.

HERMANN: The Babylonians had this myth as well. For them, the monster was Tiamat.

NEWT: Sounds scary.

HERMANN: The Hittites have a similar myths; the Greeks have Apollo and the python. It’s quite common. But the myth is binary. There are two parts: in the first part, she’s a creator goddess.

NEWT: And in the second part...?

HERMANN: She becomes the monstrous embodiment of primordial chaos.

NEWT: Oh. (...) Neat.

(*/interlude music #4*)

NEWT: Okay, okay. So what does... Tiamat have to do with the advocate? What makes you think Rothco was looking for this artifact?

HERMANN: The nature of the exploration. This location, in particular. It was presented in a paper over 40 years ago.

NEWT: What paper?

HERMANN: (darkly) A paper that was never published. A paper hypothesizing a possible location for the Horn of Tiamat.

NEWT: If it was never published, how do you know about it?

HERMANN: ...My father wrote it.

NEWT: (...) (pause)

HERMANN: So your dad was into Sumerian and Babylonian mythology? As well as demon boards?

HERMANN: The Horn of Tiamat is a very particular type of mythology.

NEWT: What type is that?

HERMANN: (…) The Lars Gottlieb kind.
My father was interested in a lot of different things. But nothing came close to his obsession with the Horn. Finding it was... his life’s work.

NEWT: Huh.

HERMANN: Believe me. I’d already had just about enough of the Horn of Tiamat to last me a lifetime. ...But it looks to be back.

(beat)

NEWT: (hesitant) So you’re certain that Mark Roth is involved somehow?

HERMANN: He is, or his company is.

NEWT: Rothco.

HERMANN: Yes.

NEWT: But... why?

HERMANN: I don’t know why. Personally I’m more concerned with how.

NEWT: How?

HERMANN: (frustrated) How did he find this location? Did he somehow get his hands on my father’s work? How?

NEWT: ...How long has it been since you ate something?

HERMANN: (...) Probably... since this morning. Or possibly... Possibly yesterday.

(sound of chair)

NEWT: Let’s go get some food. I know a place.

HERMANN: I’m fine.

NEWT: (briskly) Come on. You’re burning the candle at both ends. You’ve found a third end, against the laws of physics, and you’re burning that one too.

HERMANN: (…)

NEWT: Just looking at you is making me exhausted. And hungry. Let’s go eat.

HERMANN: (…)

NEWT: (gently) Come on.

HERMANN: (standing up) We’ll come back afterwards and finish this—

NEWT: Yes, yes. Leave your stuff. We’ll come back.

NEWT (VO): We did not. I talked him into going home for the day.

(interlude music #5 begins)

It was distressing to see Dr. Gottlieb like that. But I got the feeling he would be okay in
the morning. I really did. I think... I think that the last six months have been like this for
him. This sort of state of mind. He already seems much better than he did when I finally
captured up with him in May. I got the feeling this was sort of an... aftershock.

I base this on nothing, really. Well, not quite nothing. He didn’t lock himself in the
Institute and turn off his phone this time. He came to the studio for our help. I take that
as a good sign. I guess I got the feeling he would be okay because he... isn’t in it alone.

Corny? Sorry. I know.

(music fades out)

But I was right. The next time we spoke, Dr. G sounded a lot better. He apologized for
being “in a state”—I told him no worries.

For a minute there, it seemed like things were looking good. For a minute.

(door opening)

NEWT: Hey. You said you wanted to talk about something?

MAKO: Hey, Newt. Yeah. Sit down.

(sound of chair)

NEWT: What’s up? You look, um, worried.

MAKO: I... Well, no. I don’t want to upset you—I’m just going to play it.

NEWT: Uh—okay. Play me what?

MAKO: (distressed) ...I was cleaning up one of your sleep notes. For the episode. The ones you
gave me from your handheld.

NEWT: Yes?

MAKO: Yes. Yes. Well, one file was a lot longer than it should have been. I thought, “Oh, maybe
he fell back asleep with his thumb on it.” And... maybe you did, but—

NEWT: (audibly nervous) But what?

MAKO: Well, there was something on it. After you stop talking... It’s all quiet for a while... and
then...

NEWT: And then what?

(mouse click—recording plays)

(static, room tone)

(Newt breathing slowly—asleep)

(traffic)

(pipes)

(Newt rolls over)
(pipes)

(something rustles)

(hoarse whisper)

(whispering continues—words are foreign, indistinct. Not English.)

NEWT: (horrified) What...

(whispering continues)

(sharp gasp)

(all sounds stop)

(steady breathing resumes)

(click—end of recording)

MAKO: (hesitant) So I...

NEWT: (whispering) What the [expletive bleeped]...

MAKO: (sympathetic, but also frightened) Yeah...

NEWT: Mako, what the [expletive bleeped]? What was that? Who was in my bedroom?

MAKO: I don’t—wait. What do you mean, who?

NEWT: I mean, who was that, whispering?

MAKO: You don’t recognize that voice?

NEWT: Um, no, I did not?

MAKO: Newt, that was you. That was your voice.

NEWT: (...)

MAKO: You were talking.

(outro music begins)

NEWT (VO): Next time: Mako tries to talk me into taking a vacation. We speak to an expert about the manuscript, get updates from Europe, and start searching for the boy in the pool.

I’m Newt Geiszler. This is the Black Tapes Podcast.

See you next month.

(music fades out)
I Put a Spell On You

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

SEASON 2, EPISODE 4: I PUT A SPELL ON YOU

PUB 22 AUGUST 2013

(familiar theme music: acoustic guitar, church bells, a faraway female voice)

VOICE OF MAKO MORI: Welcome to Season Two of the Black Tapes Podcast.

This season, we’re continuing our exploration of belief and the search for truth, and our profile of the enigmatic Dr. Hermann Gottlieb. We are examining his collection of unsolved cases, pursuing the theory that they are all, somehow, connected.

Our story progresses in order, week by week. So, if you’re a first-time listener, welcome to the show. You should go back and start at episode one.

(interlude music #6)

MAKO: This episode is a little different. Our host Newt Geiszler and I recorded and produced it over the course of the month, per usual. But Newt’s health took a bit of a turn in the final week. He had to go on a temporary leave. Since we didn’t want the episode to go up late, I and our other producers took care of the remaining edits.

Don’t worry, Newt’s leave is temporary. It is a health concern. He will be back in the studio next month.

There shouldn’t be a pause between episodes. If there is, we will post an update in the feed and on the show’s Twitter account, @blacktapespod.

(interlude music #4 fades in)

This episode: We speak to an expert on Motherwell’s manuscript, and investigate a possible connection to the missing Caravaggio painting, Il Sorriso Capovolto.

First, we had a short follow-up with Karla Krasner, whom we interviewed last episode.

(interlude music #4 fades out)

NEWT: Hello?

KARLA: (tinny through Skype) (German accent) Newt? Hello. Can you hear me?

NEWT: Hi! Yes. I can hear you. Thanks for giving us the time.

KARLA: Yes. I only have a few minutes.

NEWT: Of course—this won’t take long. So, I asked Hermann about the boy in the pool, like you told me to. He said he didn’t know anything about it.

KARLA: Hm. Interesting.
NEWT: Could you tell us more?

KARLA: Are you not a journalist, Newt?

NEWT: Uh—I am.

KARLA: An investigative journalist?

NEWT: Yes...

KARLA: Lincoln was a small town when we grew up there. You are an investigator. You can find it.

NEWT: Uh. Okay.

KARLA: It sounds like Hermann was not happy you spoke with me.

NEWT: ...Not really. But we worked it out.

KARLA: Good. I am glad.

NEWT (VO): So, with that somewhat cryptic exhortation, we set to work finding the pool boy. We didn’t have a ton to go on, just a timeframe—approximately Hermann’s childhood—and a location—Lincoln, MA. Most suburbs contain a lot of swimming pools.

But our interns were undaunted. Under Mako’s direction, they got to work sifting through the Lincoln papers and the archives of the Boston Globe. We’ll have updates on that as soon as we find something.

On the main stage, we are still working on the theory that the unsolved cases we’ve looked into so far are all connected—and connect back to Dr. Gottlieb. Ironic, of course, since he personally seems to hate this theory quite a lot.

It’s not very Sherlock Holmes of me to work from an assumption in this way, I know. But it’s the only way that makes any sense right now. Maybe that’s a flaw in my framework, or a flaw in my judgement. But hey, it’s not Dr. Gottlieb’s podcast.

In the last episode, I posited the theory that the Ceonophus—a book of incantations one thousand years old, meant to invoke the end of days—might be the book depicted in the infamous Caravaggio painting. Further, I theorized that the book in the painting is the same as the book found in the kidnapper Robert Motherwell’s possession.

I brought my theory to an expert.

WOMAN: This is not the Ceonophus.

NEWT: It’s not?

WOMAN: Mr. Geiszler, I’d eat my hat.

NEWT (VO): Dr. Belinda Wagner is a rare books dealer with a strange little shop in Providence. When I arrived for our appointment, I actually couldn’t tell if the shop was open—the door was locked, and the signage was extremely unclear about the hours. It appeared to only be open a few hours every Thursday. But before I had time to wonder how Dr. Wagner stayed in business, the door was flung open and I was greeted by a
diminutive scholar with a bright plaid vest and an eager smile.

She led me through her store to a back room. I only got a glimpse at the books, but they were old. Like, really old. Beautiful, though. Very well-maintained. The most beautiful books were reserved for Dr. Belinda’s back office. It was a low room with no window, lit instead by a lot of floor and desk lamps. There were a few books open on her workbench, mid-restoration, surrounded by tools.

NEWT: So are all those books for sale? To what market?

DR. WAGNER: *(dancing voice with a high timbre)* Oh, no. I mean, yes. They are, technically, for sale. But I rarely sell any. I can’t really bear to part with them.

NEWT: Then how, if you don’t mind my asking...?


NEWT: That’s the Yale rare books library?

DR. WAGNER: *(warmly)* Yes.

NEWT: I bet you see a lot of amazing stuff. Have you ever—

DR. WAGNER: Worked on the Voynich Manuscript? *(cheerful)* Yes. I have! I did a restoration a few years ago.

NEWT: *(amazed)* How did you know that was what I was going to ask?

DR. WAGNER: For a rare book, the Voynich Manuscript is very popular! It’s like the Humphrey Bogart of rare books. *Everyone* has a thing for it.

NEWT: *(laughing)* Okay! Interesting comparison.

DR. WAGNER: Now, your book on the other hand...

NEWT: Yes?

DR. WAGNER: No one knows it.

NEWT: No one but you.

DR. WAGNER: Well, I don’t either. It's like nothing I've seen before. You don’t have the... original in your possession, do you?

NEWT: No, I’m afraid not. It’s locked up in evidence in Westfield, Mass.

DR. WAGNER: Ah. Of course.

NEWT: So you said you don’t know it, either? You don’t recognize this work?

DR. WAGNER: No. But I can read it. It’s very interesting! It seems to be a grimoire. *(explanatory)* A book of spells.

NEWT: I know what a grimoire is.
DR. WAGNER: Oh yes. Yes, you look like you play D&D. *Newt laughs.* Yes. Good. Well, the language is a combination of Latin and Old East Slavic, so you can be forgiven for not recognizing it.

NEWT: Is that an unusual combination?

DR. WAGNER: Nowadays? Yes. When this was written? Probably not. But no one has spoken this language since the 15th century.

NEWT: So you would say it’s from around then?

DR. WAGNER: That seems most likely. I’d really have to see the original to pinpoint the age, but... Well, from the scans, anyway, it seems to be in excellent condition.

NEWT: So the alleged kidnapper, alleged monk, who had this book—he said it was a book of prayers. Not a grimoire.

DR. WAGNER: No, no prayers that I can find. There are some sections of the Bible.

NEWT: That’s interesting...

DR. WAGNER: Yes.

NEWT: Dr. W, would you say there’s a possibility this is a copy the Ceonophus?

DR. WAGNER: Oh yes, the Ceonophus! You did mention that in your email.

NEWT: Yes. So is...?

DR. WAGNER: Absolutely not. This is not the Ceonophus.

NEWT: *disappointed* It’s not?

DR. WAGNER: Mr. Geiszler, I’d eat my hat.

NEWT: Because of the spells?

DR. WAGNER: Yes. And the time period.

NEWT: But if it was a translation—an updated version?

DR. WAGNER: I don’t think so. I also, frankly, don’t believe the Ceonophus exists. Even if it did, the content of this book is quite different from the alleged content of that piece of questionably existent apocalypse apocrypha.

NEWT: I see...

DR. WAGNER: If that’s what you’re after, I won’t be much help. *But I can* tell you about this book which we do know exists.

*sound of paper*

DR. WAGNER: I took the liberty of printing out some of the more informative chapters.

NEWT: Oh!

*sound of paper being smacked on desk*
DR. WAGNER: So the first part—here—appears to be sections of the Latin Bible.

NEWT: Uh-huh.

DR. WAGNER: But not all of it. I only gave it a once- or twice-over, but some lines have definitely been omitted from certain verses. Intentionally, I’m quite sure.

NEWT: Really?

DR. WAGNER: Yes. I have a collection, myself of... Well, of old Bibles with mistakes in them.

NEWT: Ye olde typos?

DR. WAGNER: More or less, yes. Mostly I just think it’s quite funny. Anyway, these, these are not typos.

NEWT: No.

DR. WAGNER: No. They’re omissions. Redacted.

NEWT: Do you have any idea why?

DR. WAGNER: To save time?

NEWT: Oh?

DR. WAGNER: Maybe the scribe wanted to get to the juicy stuff. Which is the second half of the book. (pages turning) The second half is where we start getting some Slavic words mixed in with the Latin.

NEWT: Interesting. And are these the...?

DR. WAGNER: Spells? Yes. Glosh-kumen-toh!

NEWT: What now?

DR. WAGNER: That’s the name of this demon.

NEWT: Oh my!

DR. WAGNER: Yes! This is a spell to summon him. The accompanying text describes him as “dangerous but mischievous.” To invite him into your presence, you must speak his name aloud three times.

NEWT: Like a... chant?

DR. WAGNER: Yes. As in: Gloshkumentoh! Gloshkumentoh! Gloshkumentoh!

NEWT: (taken aback) Oh—

(pause)

DR. WAGNER: Hmm. Seems the demon has turned down our invitation.

NEWT: ...Your invitation.

DR. WAGNER: You don’t want to meet him, Mr. Geiszler? He sounds like a fun houseguest.
NEWT: *(a little nervous)* Maybe, maybe.

DR. WAGNER: There’s nothing to worry about. These aren’t real, of course.

NEWT: No. Of course not.

DR. WAGNER: It’s like a game. Hundreds of years ago, these monks were sitting around—no TV or comic books to pass the time, no D&D—bored to death. Celibacy and prayer get pretty old. So they would sit around the hearth thinking up spooky stories, to scare one another. This is probably one of those games. A parlor game for the devoutly bored.

NEWT: Sounds fun?

DR. WAGNER: And I mean, who among us hasn’t thought about it?

NEWT: *(surprised)* About... summoning a demon?

DR. WAGNER: Of course! *(sound of paper)* The spells in this grimoire are quite unique. It appears to be a collection of demons you could summon—a menu, maybe. A yearbook. A dating website!

NEWT: *(laughs, nervously)*

DR. WAGNER: ...And the requisite spells and ceremony for that. Are you alright, Mr. Geiszler? You look a little pale. Do you have asthma?

NEWT: Um—no?

DR. WAGNER: Oh. Good. I know my office is a little musty. Sometimes it bothers people’s... you know. Sinuses and things.

NEWT: No, no. I’m alright.

DR. WAGNER: Alright, then, let me show you this one. Say that word.

NEWT: This—this word?

DR. WAGNER: *Jurashka.*

NEWT: Um... *Jurashka.*

DR. WAGNER: *Jurashka.* Rolls off the tongue, doesn’t it? He sounds like a nice young man. Now, if you want this nice young man in your life, just say *Jurashka* again tonight, twice, at midnight, with your eyes closed. You’ll need to be in the dark, facing East.

NEWT: I see...

DR. WAGNER: Just do and say all of that, and Jurashka will appear as a pair of great flaming red eyes, burning in the darkness towards you.

NEWT: *(faintly)* Cool.

DR. WAGNER: Oh—and this one!

NEWT: Yeah?

DR. WAGNER: I like this one. *Kla-to-ma-kah.* Say it with me, just for fun.
NEWT: I... I think I’d prefer not to, Dr. Dub.

DR. WAGNER: It’s easy! Kla-to-ma-kah.

NEWT: I...

DR. WAGNER: Are you sure you’re alright?

NEWT: No—yeah.

DR. WAGNER: You look worried, Mr. Geiszler. There’s nothing to fear. None of this is remotely real. It’s not even slightly canonical.

NEWT: Yeah, I know. Yeah. (clears throat) I’m okay. What does this one do?

DR. WAGNER: (reading) Ah... This Klatomakah is apparently rather powerful. You don’t even have to say his name aloud, to conjure his presence. To extend the invitation, all you have to do...

NEWT: Yes?

DR. WAGNER: (slowly) All you have to do is think his name. Klatomakah.

NEWT: ...If I, if I just think of his name... he’ll show up.

DR. WAGNER: Yes, that’s what it says here. All you have to do is think the name Klatomakah, at night, with your eyes closed. Do this, and you’ve sent him the invitation.

NEWT: Oh boy.

NEWT (VO): I used to be so gung-ho about all this demon stuff. But then every night turned into either insomnia or nightmares; and then we found that weird whisper on my sleep tape, well... I find I scare a lot easier.

I knew it was all invented—like she said—probably. But in that dark basement room, surrounded by ancient dusty tomes and creaking boards... Well. If I wasn’t already having sleep problems, I would have said this book was why, that night, I didn’t get any sleep at all.

SPONSOR BREAK #1

NEWT: So, as we’ve mentioned in the past, we get a lot of listener mail.

MAKO: We sure do.

NEWT: Which is great. Mako and I try to read all of it, but sometimes there’s a delay.

MAKO: Yes. We got an interesting email last month, but we didn’t get to it until recently.

MAKO (VO): One of our listeners did her graduate thesis on Il Sorriso Capovolto, back in the ‘80s. When she heard our detailed description of it in episode 202, well... She noticed something. She noticed that something was off.

Professor Emily Byrne is an illustrator and professor in Vancouver, Canada. She said
she started listening to the podcast after heard about the return of the stolen Flinck. She did her master’s here in Boston, in the Tufts and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts joint program. Her thesis was on the Caravaggio. She says she came to the ISG all the time, to study the original.

BYRNE: *(light voice, tinny through Skype)* It was the 80s, so there weren’t exactly high-res scans online.

NEWT: I expect not.

BYRNE: Well, when you described the book in detail, I was surprised by what you said. It didn’t sound quite... right to me. I wasn’t sure if I was misremembering. It has been thirty years.

NEWT: Right.

BYRNE: So I googled the high-res scan. Sure enough, the book was like you described.

NEWT: Uh-huh.

BYRNE: But it still... still didn’t sound right. It was bothering me! So I went and dug up my files from my thesis.

NEWT: Oh, wow.

BYRNE: Yeah! It was hard to track down! I had to go to my parents’ house and root around in the attic, and when I found it, my thesis didn’t even contain a detailed description of that section of the painting. *Ugh.* So, I cracked open my box of research materials.

NEWT: I bet you never thought that would come in handy again, huh?

BYRNE: I absolutely did *not.* But it did!

NEWT: It sure did. Please tell the audience what you found.

BYRNE: *(excited)* Okay—okay. I don’t really know what to make of what I found. I have some detailed notes, a sketch, and a crappy photo. But they all agree—the book is red.

NEWT: Completely red.

BYRNE: *Completely.* The page gilding is gold. I do have something that could be a star on the cover, yes—but my notes just say “symbol,” unfortunately. And no gold latticework.

NEWT: So what we’re getting from this is...

BYRNE: ...The archived scans are *not* of the original painting.

NEWT: So the image we’ve had of this painting, since its theft, for over thirty years is... a fake?

BYRNE: Either that, or the one stolen from the museum was a fake in the first place.

NEWT: Which seems less likely.

BYRNE: It does.

MAKO (VO): This was a pretty major discovery. We got in touch with the museum, and, much as their staff like us, the higher-ups did not consent to an interview.
They said they didn’t know anything about these inconsistencies. They agreed to let us go through their archives and see if we could find any ourselves.

(interview resumes)

NEWT: Now, Emily, do you remember any differences regarding the code?

BYRNE: Not really. I’m afraid I didn’t copy it down. But there’s a lot of scholarship surrounding the code. If it was really changed—if the archive image is faked, somehow, I would be surprised if the code is changed. It’s the most closely studied part of the painting. That, people would notice.

NEWT: If not to throw people off the scent of the code, then why on earth would they... create a fake? What could be important about the color of the book?

BYRNE: Search me.

NEWT: Yeesh. It just gets weirder and weirder.

BYRNE: Welcome to art history.

MAKO (VO): It took about a week to go through the full museum archive on the painting. We didn’t find anything that backed up Professor Byrne’s findings.

MAKO: So what do you think?

NEWT: I don’t really know.

MAKO: She sent us her files. She’s definitely not lying about what she saw.

NEWT: (half-hearted) Undiagnosed colorblindness?

MAKO: In a painter?

NEWT: I’m kidding. (sighs) There’s a photo, anyway. It’s pretty faded, but, she’s right. It’s definitely red.

----------- OFF THE RECORD -----------

MAKO: What’s wrong?

NEWT: Nothing, I just... Wish something would make sense.

MAKO: I know.

----------- RESUME RECORD -----------

MAKO: Let’s get some working theories.

NEWT: What if... the book in the original painting really is the Ceonophus?

MAKO: Or that certain groups believe it to be?

NEWT: And they stole it because... the original Ceonophus is lost. So that’s the only page left in existence.

MAKO: Sure. Could be.
NEWT: Maybe there's some kind of... particular power to the original.

MAKO: (doubtful) Okay.

NEWT: And they stole it. Because they need it? Or to cover the trail.

MAKO: Trail?

NEWT: Maybe there’s something to connect the painting with the real Ceonophus. The trail to find it.

MAKO: Maybe...

---------- OFF THE RECORD ----------

NEWT: (long sigh) (muffled thump of forehead on desk) Ugh.

MAKO: Stay with it. Whose interest would that be in?

NEWT: (plaintively) (voice muffled by desk) Satan?

MAKO: Come on.

NEWT: (sigh) (sound of chair) (sniffs)

---------- RESUME RECORD ----------

NEWT: Maybe Rothco.

MAKO: Could be. Maybe Lars Gottlieb.

NEWT: (amused) Right. Maybe he’s behind the art heist.

MAKO: He was an antiquities dealer, and this painting does qualify as an ‘antiquity.’

NEWT: (sighs) I think we need to delve more into Rothco. Someone with Mark Roth’s kind of money and power would definitely have access to the high art black market.

MAKO: Maybe. Do you think he’s the Advocate?

NEWT: I don’t really know what that is. Motherwell mentioned it once, and now Hermann is convinced it’s him? Because of one covert archaeology dig? I don’t know if I buy it.

MAKO: Hmm.

MAKO (VO): Newt was pretty out of it. It was worse than it had been all year. I was getting really worried. I felt like he was drifting. I sat down to talk to him about it—off the record—to really convince him to take some time off.

I told him this project was keeping him up at night, and he needed to step away. He said there was too much going on to stop now.

I hesitated to include an explanation like this. I prefer to respect Newt’s privacy as much as possible. But we decided it was necessary background to explain what happened next.

SPONSOR BREAK #2
(door opening)

NEWT: The prodigal reporter returns!


NEWT: Rude.

(footsteps, fabric sounds as they presumably hug)

MAKO (VO): Raleigh Becket was back in Boston for work this week. I invited him by the studio to share his latest update.

NEWT: I bet Mako was happy to see you.

BECKET: I think so. She asked me to come with her to the reception this weekend.

NEWT: Oh, the Gardener reopening? Wow. Are you sure this was a work trip, Becket? That’s suspiciously fortuitous timing...

BECKET: Mad she asked me before you could?

NEWT: (archly) I don’t have to answer that.

(sound of door)

MAKO: Hey guys. Sorry. Herc was showing me a video of Max.

BECKET: (laughs)

NEWT: Typical.

(sitting down)

MAKO: Okay, Raleigh. What have you got for us?

BECKET: So, like I mentioned, I have a friend who’s good with computers. I went to visit them. They took a look at the emails from Tomás, and the geotagged sound file. Then they did some stuff while I went to get us some takeout... When I got back, they had two more geotags for me.

NEWT: Sweet.

BECKET: Yeah! So, the sound file was recorded at Limoges, like you found, Mako. But when he attached it to the blank email and sent it, the wifi network he was on was in Hungary.

MAKO: Hungary?

BECKET: Yeah. Any idea why?

MAKO: Well... (waiting for Newt to jump in) (Newt says nothing) Well, remember we spoke to that historian about Adémar the monk? He went on a pilgrimage across Europe. Maybe he passed through Hungary?

NEWT: Mhm. I can ask the professor. Where in Hungary was it, Raleigh?
BECKET: Small town. I forget the name. I'll send it to you.

NEWT: What about the first email? Any geotag on that?

BECKET: Yeah. It was Tuscany.

NEWT: I thought in his first email, he said he was going to Sicily? Not Tuscany.

MAKO: Maybe he was on his way.

NEWT: What’s in Tuscany?

BECKET: Lots of stuff. Lots of art. And...

MAKO: And?

BECKET: A town called Porto Ercole. Not far from the place he sent his email.

MAKO: What’s there?

BECKET: Well, in 2010 they found some bones there that they now, almost positively, have identified as the remains of Caravaggio.

NEWT: What!

MAKO: Interesting. Makes sense. Considering he’s after the painting.

BECKET: Yeah. Historically, Caravaggio’s death was shrouded in mystery. No one could agree if he died from fever, a duel, syphilis, botulism...

MAKO: And now?

BECKET: This evidence suggested he died of lead poisoning. Then later tests made it look like he died of sepsis from a wound. A dueling wound he sustained in Naples.

NEWT: Ouch.

BECKET: Well. You know how it was back then.

(sound of papers)

MAKO: Great. (...) This is great stuff, Raleigh. You’ll send us all this?

BECKET: You got it.

MAKO: So where do you want to go next? Do you want to go to Tuscany, or Hungary? Do you have the time?

BECKET: I think I have a few days next month. I’m game for either. Why don’t you guys look into it and let me know?

MAKO: Okay... I think we’re leaning towards Hungary. Just because it’s the more recent geotag.

BECKET: Makes sense.

(sound of knocking)
MAKO: Come in!

*(door opens)*

MAKO: Oh—hey, Dr. G.

*(someone’s chair moves)*

HERMANN: Hello Ms. Mori. Newton. You must be Mr. Becket?

BECKET: That’s me. Dr. Gottlieb?

*(footsteps)*

HERMANN: Pleasure to meet you. I was wondering if I might have a word with you. When you’re finished here.

BECKET: I think we’re... we’re all set? Yeah?

NEWT: Yeah man, go for it.

HERMANN: (...) I meant—in private.

NEWT: Oh. Right. (...) Um... Studio B should be empty. Next door.

HERMANN: Thank you.

BECKET: Later Newt.

NEWT: Yeah.

*(footsteps)*

*(door closes)*

*(pause)*

MAKO: Wonder what that’s all about.

NEWT: Yeah...

MAKO: *(standing up)* I’m going to go scan these. I’ll be back in a minute to go over the schedule.

NEWT: Sure. Cool. Take your time.

*(footsteps)*

*(door closes)*

*(pause...)*

*(sound of buttons being pressed)*

*(static)*

*(voices)*
(levels adjust—voices become audible: Becket and Hermann speaking in an undertone in Studio B)

HERMANN: ...man who looked like this?

BECKET: No. I didn’t see anyone who looked like that.

HERMANN: What about this woman?

BECKET: Actually, yeah. I recognize her. She bid on something.

HERMANN: On what?

BECKET: An artifact. I think it was a vase. She didn’t win.

HERMANN: Did you speak to her?

BECKET: No, not me.

HERMANN: Was she wearing a rings? A wedding ring, or any other ring?

BECKET: I don’t remember. Sorry.

HERMANN: Did you see her speaking to anyone else?

BECKET: Yes. That guy.

HERMANN: At the reception? After the auction?

BECKET: Yes. And another thing—when she was there, her hair didn’t look like that. It was dyed b —

MAKO: Newt?

(clatter)

(audio feed from studio ends)

——————— OFF THE RECORD ———————

NEWT: Yeah?

MAKO: What were you doing?

NEWT: No—oh, I was just—

MAKO: (stricken) Newt! Were you listening to them?

NEWT: Yes—but—

MAKO: Turn it off. Turn it off right now.

NEWT: I did...

MAKO: Newt! This is so far over the line! Gottlieb mistrusts us already, but Raleigh is our friend, how can you—

NEWT: Yeah, your friend maybe, but I think—I think maybe they—
MAKO: *(incredulous)* What? You think what?

NEWT: *(desperate)* There’s something they’re not telling us—

MAKO: Newt. Why would Raleigh keep secrets from us?

NEWT: *(frantic)* You didn’t hear them—they were talking about an auction, a woman with—

MAKO: Stop! Stop. I don’t want to hear it. Did you turn it off?

NEWT: Yes! It’s off. It’s off. I already... Oh... *(indistinct noise)*

MAKO: No, no. *(footsteps)* Stop. It’s okay.

NEWT: *(muffled)* That was so stupid.

MAKO: Stop, stop. It’s okay.

NEWT: *(muffled)* *(inaudible)*

MAKO: I’ll talk to them. But then you have to.

____________ RESUME RECORD ______________

NEWT (VO): Mako caught me. I regretted it almost immediately. I’d let my paranoia get the better of me.

We talked to them about it.

Dr. G was not pleased.

Mako was surprised I wanted to include this in the show at all, but I felt really bad about it. I decided I wanted to be as transparent as possible. Particularly for Hermann’s sake. He was... really upset.

____________ OFF THE RECORD ______________

MAKO: Thanks for speaking with me.

*(door closing)*

*(two sets of footsteps)*

HERMANN: *(flat)* This is off the record, I presume?

MAKO: Yes.

*(both sit down)*

MAKO: I know you’re upset. You have every reason to be.

HERMANN: *(...)*

MAKO: I just wanted to talk with you, because there’s something important I think Newt isn't telling you.

HERMANN: What might that be?
MAKO: Newt has been... He’s been suffering from insomnia for the past eight months.

HERMANN: Insomnia?

MAKO: Yes. It’s quite bad. I don’t think he’s slept more than two consecutive hours this whole year. We’ve been worried it might start affecting his judgment. Well, I think we can safely say that it finally has.

HERMANN: (...) The whole year? Since... January?

MAKO: Since last December. So, no, he hasn’t talked to you about this?

HERMANN: No.

MAKO: I didn’t think so. And you don’t listen to the show, then? He's talked about it on there.

HERMANN: No... not since the first few episodes. Last year. (...) (quiet) Seems a lifetime ago, doesn’t it?

MAKO: Sometimes it does.

(beat)

HERMANN: So Newton has disclosed this to his audience, but not to me?

MAKO: Seems like it, yes. I told him he should talk to you about it, but... I’m sorry. I don’t like going behind his back like this. But I’m telling you this so that you will ask him about it. You two need to discuss it. There’s a reason his judgment is impaired. He isn’t just... misbehaving. Newt wouldn’t do this unless something was wrong.

HERMANN: Is it really as bad as that?

MAKO: He isn’t himself.

(beat)

MAKO: I’m going to tell him to talk to you about it. I don’t know how to convince him to take a break from the show. Maybe you can.

HERMANN: I can try. (sound of chair) Thank you, Ms. Mori.

MAKO: (sound of chair) Of course.

——————— RESUME RECORD ———————

NEWT (VO): Hermann and I talked things over a few days later. He accepted my apology and I talked to him about my... health problems. He said what I recorded wasn’t actually very important. It was tangentially related to Rothco, apparently. As long as I promised publicly not to record him without his knowledge—ever again—he agreed it was okay to leave it in the show.

So here I am: promising publicly.

(outro music begins)

MAKO (VO): Eventually (...) Newt agreed to take a three-week break.
We debated about whether to produce and release this episode at all, or to simply go on hiatus. But Newt was insistent. Even though I wouldn’t let him help edit it, he wanted me to do it. I think he wants it released, as insurance—a motivation to get better.

Still, I apologize for how short this episode is. We hope to be back next month with a regular episode.

It’s the Black Tapes. I’m Mako Mori. Thanks for listening.

See you next month.

*(music fades out)*

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*Saturday, August 17th*

The gray pre-dusk sky summer sky had started to drizzle. They stood among the line on the stone walkway, waiting to be frisked before entering the reception. Security at the Isabella Stewart Gardner was, understandably, tight. Still—it was a strange bottleneck before entering a glamorous gallery reopening for an infamously stolen artwork. It was, in all likelihood, the most glamorous event he’d ever be invited to in a non-work capacity. Newt wished he owned a nicer suit.

He hummed anxiously to himself, shifting his weight from foot to foot, fiddling with the button on his left sleeve. It was loose. He was feeling okay, overall, actually. He glanced at Hermann, who was looking at the entrance with flat distaste.

“Nervous?” Newt asked.

“No. Why should I be?” Hermann said, not turning.

“Spoken like someone trying to talk himself out of being nervous,” Newt said. “First fancy gallery gala?”

“I suppose so.”

Newt smiled to himself.

“And you?” Hermann asked. “Are you feeling nervous?”

“A bit,” admitted Newt.

“First time?”

“I’ve been nervous lots of times,” Newt said with a smile. Hermann looked at him. He was more dressed up than Newt, who was wearing his only black suit. This reception was black tie, so he had on his blackest tie, which he was pretty sure an aunt had given him in college. But Hermann was wearing a bow tie. Also black. Of course. His hair was combed flat too. Newt hadn’t decided how he felt about the bow tie yet. The jury was still out.

They had come together. Post-recording incident on Thursday, it had been decided that a conversation was in order. This had led to an uncomfortable pre-reception Swan Boat ride in the humid Public Gardens, where they had sat in the back row and Hermann had questioned Newt uneasily about his insomnia and their driver wouldn’t stop whistling.

But it seemed the conversation had gone well. Hermann’s anger about the incident had, apparently, been assuaged by concern for Newt’s health. That was, all things considered, pretty nice of him.
Security waved them forward and Newt was patted down by a guy who looked more like Secret Service than a bouncer. What were they so worried about? Weapons? Newt thought about the things he could have smuggled in as his guard frisked him. *Shoes,* Newt thought. *Knife shoe. Duh. Ring with poison in the top. Wristwatch bomb. Too easy.*

The guard told him he was all set. Newt held the door for Hermann, and they stepped into the dark vestibule.

The first step into the Gardener always felt like a step back in time. The side entrance opened into a narrow stone foyer, darkly lit by wall sconces. The heavy closing door echoed down the stone hallway with finality.

Voices, footsteps, and a distant quartet flowed to them from above the courtyard beyond their dark foyer. The party was already underway in the gallery. A black-clad security guard stood impassively at the end of the vestibule, in the light of the courtyard.

Newt touched his loose button. He was still humming quietly. “I have ‘Bicycle Race’ stuck in my head something fierce,” he said in a hushed voice. The stone bounced everything back to them like a cave, making him feel he should be quiet.

“That’s what the driver was whistling on our boat, earlier,” Hermann said, equally quiet.

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“The one with those sunglasses?”

“Yes. Apt song for a pedal boat, I suppose.”

“Guess so,” Newt said. "Frankly, I wouldn’t have expected you to know that song."

“Of course I know Queen,” Hermann said briskly, giving Newt a look. In a friendly way. A friendly-annoyed way. The way he used to do.

Maybe this awkward Swan Boat talk really had smoothed things over.

“Ready?” Newt said.

“Almost,” said Hermann, glancing down at his chest.

“What?” said Newt, looking down reflexively. “It’s black tie, right? This tie is black. Isn’t it?”

“It is,” Hermann said as Newt looked back up at him, and then without so much as a warning he was reaching over and fixing Newt’s tie.

Newt froze. Hermann pinched the knot, and with devastating unconcern, took the tail and tugged. The knot tightened around Newt’s neck. Newt stayed still, something rushing in his ears. Then Hermann pulled his hands away, out of Newt’s personal space.

“I understand it’s a matter of your personal ‘style,’” Hermann was saying, “—and I apply that term loosely in this case—but you really ought not to go around with it loose like that.”

“Oughtn’t I?” said Newt, terribly flustered. He adjusted the tie meaninglessly on his chest. “No need to be rude about it.”
But he couldn’t control his own eyes which for a moment leveled on Hermann’s mouth as he spoke. Pointed down to his throat, neatly tied with his neat bow tie. Newt resisted the urge to “fix it” in retribution, but there was nothing wrong with it. Nothing at all. He swallowed. The jury had come back in with the bow tie decision. They elected not to fix it, but to seize it by the tab and pull, yanking the tight knot undone. He quickly looked away and turned to the corridor.

“Come on. Let’s go.”

The security guard eyed them as they walked together towards the party.

It took up the whole second floor of the villa, in the galleries and stone walkways overlooking the beautiful courtyard below. The center was, of course, the restored Flinck, *Landscape with Obelisk*.

Inside the gallery, Newt found himself crammed between the backs of many knots of dressed-up people, all either too tall and glamorous or too old and bejeweled for Newt to insert himself. Hermann said something about drinks and disappeared. An indeterminate amount of time passed, and he found himself standing next to a window in a half-empty side gallery, staring at someone’s green shoes from across the room. The sky had cleared and the sun had almost set. Hadn’t they just arrived?

Newt looked at his hand to make sure he hadn’t drunk anything, but it was empty.

He checked his sleeve button. Still attached. But coming looser.

“Newt?”

He turned and saw Mako coming towards him through the uncrowded room. She was wearing a dark blue evening gown and simple silver jewelry. Newt beamed at her.

“Mako! You look so beautiful,” he said. She smiled.

“And you look very charming.”

“That’s what the mayor said!”

“Is he really here?” she said. “I thought I saw him, but Raleigh wouldn’t let me say hi.”

“Is he actually?” said Newt. “I was kidding. Raleigh, is Menino here? I would think it’s past his bedtime.”

Raleigh was coming up next to Mako and handing her a glass of champagne.

“No, he’s definitely here,” Raleigh said. “We saw him chatting by the painting.” He took a sip of his champagne and threaded his arm through Mako’s casually. Newt took notice. “First time I got a good look at it. This whole party is for that painting, but, and I gotta say it... It’s a pretty boring painting.”

“It is,” Newt agreed, tearing his eyes away from their linked arms. Were they together again, or was this just a you’re-here-for-a-week thing? Why hadn’t she told him? *Stop. It’s fine. You can ask her later.*

Newt looked up at Raleigh, whose eyes were on the elaborate stonework fireplace, and then at Mako. He winked. She smiled back wryly.

“Come on. Let’s go see the painting, huh?” she said. “We did find it, after all.”
“I suppose we did,” said Newt.

The museum director, whom they had met a few times before, was standing by the restored painting talking animatedly to every guest who came to look. She kissed them each on both cheeks and shook Raleigh’s hand excitedly, then introduced them to everyone in the vicinity. It took a while to tear themselves away, but then, it didn’t feel like much time at all to Newt. It must have been long, because Mako was saying, as they walked off, “My God, I thought she was never going to let us go.”

“I need another drink,” said Raleigh.

“I don’t think I want a drink,” Newt said. "Do you guys know where the Caravaggio used to hang?"

"Third floor," Raleigh said.

"But it’s closed for the party," Mako said.

"You could probably still get up there, though," said Becket. "If you wanted."

"Raleigh!” said Mako. "Don’t encourage him!"

"I might..." Newt began to say, watching a pair of crocodile-green dress shoes walk by. He followed the pants up to a face, a surprising distance from the feet. A tall, bulky man looked back at Newt as they passed, his expression blankly displeased.

The man was frowning, but when Newt made eye contact, his expression seemed to change. He followed them with his eyes as they walked past.

“What was up with that guy?” Newt asked Mako, who was talking to Raleigh. Raleigh intercepted two glasses from a passing tray.

“You want one?”

“What guy?”

“That guy.”

“I didn’t see him.”

Newt turned. The man was turning and going into the adjacent gallery. Without a word to the others he turned and followed.

"Newt?"

Newt followed him into the crowded gallery. There he was—green shoes. The man edged between two knots of people and then...

What happened next happened quickly. It was so fast, Newt could not be quite sure of it. But there was a waitress, holding a tray of champagne flutes, walking by the man in the other direction. He raised his hand to let the tray go by. But as he did, he did something with his wrist—touched it with his other hand—as it passed over the glasses. His arm came down, and Newt saw him touch his thick ring—snap it shut. The top had opened.

He had opened the top.

Newt stopped dead as the waiter came towards him and then passed him by, tray in hand, eyes on
the door. Follow her, or follow him? His wide eyes followed the man, disappearing into the crowd, as his body turned to follow the waitress—and how could he ask her to stop, tell her that someone had just put something in—

“Thank you,” leaked into his consciousness from behind him. He finished turning.

Hermann was taking a glass from her tray.

“No!”

He lunged.

The cry and the crash leveled the noise in the gallery to nothing. Silence rang out as everyone turned towards the epicenter.

Silence.

Newt stared at the shattered glass on the flagstone. He had knocked the whole tray to the floor. Frothy champagne from six destroyed glasses snaked down the cracks towards his knees. He realized he was on the flagstone too. On his knees.

Slowly, full of adrenalized dread, he turned to look up at Hermann.

The doctor was staring at him in muted disbelief. Newt could see that he was trying to keep his face impassive but in a too-late flash of interpersonal intimacy, Newt understood what his face was saying against its will. That was not restrained anger. That was fear.

For Newt.

Concern.

*Things are much worse than I thought,* that face said.

“I...”

Hermann shoved a hand under his arm and pulled him to his feet. Still everyone stared silently.

“Your clumsiness has caused a scene, once again,” Hermann said loudly. His voice was shaky and not quite the timbre of a joke. It got a few equally nervous laughs.

Covering. So improv wasn’t the doctor’s strong suit. Not very surprising.

“Come on, Newt,” he said, voice still loud and untrue.

“But—”

He yanked Newt’s arm. Newt went.

Hermann hurried him out into the hallway. A tide of murmurs rose behind them, but they walked fast, away, through an adjacent gallery, down the stairs, into the dark periphery of the courtyard. Hermann led him quickly past the archways, then abruptly stopped at one. Newt’s mind was racing in fifty different directions. By the arm, Hermann pushed him up against the pillar. Mako and Raleigh were behind him.

“Newt! What the hell happened?” Raleigh was saying.
“Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

“I’m f—I’m sorry, I don’t know what—”

“What happened?”

“What was the crash?”

“Newton, what the hell was that,” Hermann was demanding in a low voice. His hand was still clamped around Newt’s upper arm, and Newt could feel his blood pounding there.

“I’m sorry I—I thought I saw someone put something in your drink—”

Newt’s eyes widened as he spoke. Hermann’s face was close, far too close in the low light, but his head was screaming, his ears were roaring, and his pulse was pounding in the tourniquet grip on his upper arm. He squirmed, trying to get loose. “Please—” he said breathlessly. His head felt light and heavy at once.

“In my drink?” Hermann hissed. “As in an attempted poisoning?”

Newt twisted his arm— “Please let go, I’m sorry, maybe I imagined—”

Hermann stopped. His grip slackened.

“Newton?”

His voice sounded so far away.

Newt pulled his arm free. Finally. He leaned his head back on the pillar, breathing—but it didn’t seem to be getting easier. He felt dizzy, like he had just stood up too fast. But instead of fading, the vertigo was getting worse. “What,” he whispered.

Mako gasped, somewhere behind.

Hermann did something, and then put his hand on Newt’s face.

He was pressing a handkerchief into it.

“What?” Newt said again, dumbly.

“Your nose is bleeding,” Hermann murmured.

Newt put his hand over Hermann’s and took the handkerchief. He looked. Blood.

“Oh—”

Blood was pouring out of his nose.

He grabbed Hermann’s arms, falling forward, dizzy. Hermann started forward, catching him.

“Hold the—”

“I think I’m—”

“Oh my god.”

“Tip your head back!”
“I can’t s...”

“Call a cab,” someone was saying.

“We drove here,” someone else was saying. “It will be faster if we just take him.” Newt’s head was against someone’s chest, the handkerchief uselessly on his nose, his eyes shut. Even the darkness seemed to swim. “I’ll get the car...”

The last thing he remembered was the orange streetlights above the fens, blinking past the windows as he lay, head in Hermann’s lap, in the backseat of Mako’s car. Someone was running a hand gently through his hair, again and again, a welcome pressure on his pounding skull.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys! Pareidolia will be going on a two-week hiatus for winter break. I need some time to work on the last three chapters all together, which means a lot of back-and-forth and picking at them each until all the threads line up and all that. I'm also taking a trip in January, which will set me back a week. So, imagine me and Newt on our leave of absence in warmer climes.

Just as an additional note, I really want to thank you guys for reading, especially those commenting! I don't usually reply individually until I'm done with a story, but just know that I'm reading all your feedback, and I appreciate it so much! This story has been a lot of fun to work on. It's so bracing to know that my writing means something to people the way that others' writing means something to me. I'm really grateful to you for it.

Happy New Year! All the best to you & your loved ones in 2019 ♡
VOICE OF MAKO MORI: Welcome to Season Two of the Black Tapes Podcast.

NEWT: Gotcha! I’m back. Just thought it would be funny to put Mako’s intro again.

Aw, you missed me. I can tell!

NEWT (VO): This season, we’re continuing our exploration of belief and the search for truth, and our profile of the enigmatic Dr. Hermann Gottlieb. We are examining his collection of unsolved cases, pursuing the theory that they are connected.

Our story progresses in order, week by week. So, if you’re a first-time listener, welcome to the show! You’ll have to start at episode one if you want to have the faintest idea what I’m talking about.

NEWT: So, yes. I am back from my leave. I’m feeling a lot better. Shortly after we finished recording episode 204 and began the usual editing process, I collapsed from exhaustion. I spent a night in the hospital; upon my release, I decided maybe everyone was right and I should take a break.

Imagine that!

So, I packed my bag for Florida and got three good weeks of sun and sand at my retired uncle’s beach house. In the daytime I worked on my sunburn lines, and at night the sound of crickets, birds, and waves sang me to my humid rest. Turns out that ambient noise helps. I wouldn’t say I got any full nights of sleep, but I definitely got above the three-hour mark most nights. Some nights even four. Baby steps, right?

We’ll see if this trend continues, now that I’m back in my city apartment at my high-stress job, with only the traffic to lull me to sleep. But it’s hard not to feel optimistic.

NEWT (VO): A lot happened in the three weeks I was gone. Which is, of course, exactly what I was afraid of. When I would call Mako from Florida, she wouldn’t tell me anything. For the first week of my vacation, I stewed pretty miserably on that. Then I had to let it go. I just...

NEWT (VO): ...Serenity now!
That worked, more or less. For a limited time frame. But now I was back, and I needed to dive back in.

NEWT: Okay. Okay, okay.

MAKO: (amused) Okay!

NEWT: Okay! (audibly smiling) Hit me. Updates.

MAKO: (laughing) How much coffee did you have?

NEWT: None! No coffee! All natural! I’m high on life!

MAKO: (still laughing) I can see your coffee mug, right there, Newt!

NEWT: Lies! Slander. Updates!

MAKO: (clears throat) It is good to have you back. We made some good progress on the boy in the pool. I think we’ve found the right incident, but we’re still looking for the connection to Dr. G. I have an interview set up for you.

NEWT: That’s amazing! Who with? What was it?

MAKO: Slow down. We’ll get to it.

NEWT: And how is the good doctor?

MAKO: ...He seems fine.

NEWT: What—have you not heard from him?

MAKO: Oh, no. I’ve definitely heard from him... He called during your break to ask how you were doing.

NEWT: Oh?

MAKO: (exasperated) Frequently.

NEWT: (amused) Oh! I’m touched.

MAKO: You’d better call him.

NEWT: (still amused) I guess I will.

MAKO: I also spoke to Dr. Wagner, I’ll play you that interview in a minute.

NEWT: What about?

MAKO: Well, I... I was curious about the thing from your sleep note.

NEWT: (more subdued) The whispering?

MAKO: ...Yeah.

NEWT: Did she... recognize what I was saying?

MAKO: Not exactly. But she had some ideas. So, we’ll get to that one. And last, Raleigh...
NEWT: Mmhm?

MAKO: Well... (hesitant) I actually haven’t heard from Raleigh. For... a few weeks.

NEWT: Oh. Really?

MAKO: Yes. He told me he was going to Tuscany the week after he got back to Paris. Then, nothing.

NEWT: Do you think something’s... wrong?

MAKO: As in, is he upset? Or as in, did something... happen to him?

NEWT: I didn’t want to sound paranoid, but...

MAKO: I don’t know. He hasn’t answered my messages. I’m going to reach out to other Paris contacts and see if anyone knows what’s... up.

NEWT: Hmm. Not good. Yeah. I’ll try, too.

NEWT (VO): We spoke to Raleigh’s flatmate in Paris. He said Raleigh will disappear from time to time on assignment. He said it isn’t unusual for Raleigh to disappear for a few weeks. Particularly if he’s getting into something complicated or, potentially, political. Raleigh’s boss, though, said she didn’t know of any particularly risky stories he’d been working on recently. He does freelance work, so it’s possible it was for another news service. But...

All the same, it’s a bit troubling. We’ll keep looking, and keep you updated.

(interlude music #5)

First on the docket was the boy in the pool.

Our trusty interns looked long and hard for a news story about a boy in a swimming pool. Unfortunately, there have been a fair amount of accidental drownings in Lincoln over the years. There were only a handful in the timeframe of Hermann’s childhood. They couldn’t find any connection to him, though, and it seemed, from the way Karla said it, there would be some significance.

Then, one of our interns thought maybe we had been searching too narrow. He expanded some search terms and took out “swimming,” searching for ponds, lakes, other bodies of water.

He found something.


Alex Calder had been missing for eight days when his body was discovered in the woods, several miles away from his house. The pool was a vernal pool, those impermanent ponds that fill up from rain and groundwater and then dry up again in an annual, annular cycle. They’re normally quite shallow.

But Alex Calder didn’t drown. His cause of death was strangulation.

NEWT: Do you remember it?
WOMAN: Like it was yesterday. I won’t ever forget it.

NEWT (VO): There wasn’t much about it online, because it was so long ago. All we found was that little article in the archives of the town newspaper. So Mako found former police chief Helen Franken. She’s retired now, but she grew up in Lincoln, like Dr. Gottlieb. She offered to share what she remembered with us, as well as the records to which she had access. The records were pretty sparse.

FRANKEN: The boy was younger than me when he disappeared. I had sisters his age. It was all our parents were talking about. It was the summer, I remember, cause summers were peaceful back then. Kids would just go out all day with their friends, doing what-have-you, and then come home when the sun went down. One night, Alex Calder didn’t come home. Eight days later, his body was found in a puddle in the woods near the Audubon preserve.

NEWT: What had happened?

FRANKEN: Abducted. He was kidnapped. They caught the guy not long after—a gas station attendant up near Lowell. Name of Copley. He had no priors, but when they brought him in, he confessed to three other murders. Two women, a man. He died in prison sometime in the 90’s.

NEWT: Did he ever give a motive?

FRANKEN: He was evil. Pure and simple.

NEWT: Uh, that was all?

FRANKEN: That was all. Some people get pleasure from doing wrong to others. Sometimes that’s all.

NEWT: In the Calder case, was there anything... ritualistic? About the murder? Any signs, or engravings, or things like that?

FRANKEN: Not so far as I know. The guy was just a nutjob.

NEWT: Oh.

FRANKEN: I remember the footage of him going to court. His eyes were so dead. He smiled right into the camera... Gave me a chill like I’ll never forget.

NEWT: So how did they find his body after those eight days?

FRANKEN: Hmm.. I think it said in the file. Ah yeah. (sound of papers) A local kid reported it. Name of Clifford Styll, looks like.

NEWT: I see.

FRANKEN: But I’ll send you a copy of the file. You should be able to track Styll down if you want to speak with him too.

NEWT (VO): That’s exactly what we did.

I wanted to bring the Calder case to Dr. G, but I wasn’t sure how he’d react yet. I still hadn’t spoken to him since I took my leave. But I decided I wanted more information first. I wanted to dig on my own for a while and see where that would get me.

(sound of papers)
NEWT: Hello? Is this Clifford Styll?

CLIFFORD STYLL: Speaking.

NEWT (VO): Clifford Styll was born and raised in Lincoln. He has since moved to Michigan, where he works as a manager for a construction business. He graciously agreed to speak with us about his experience.

NEWT: So it was you who led the police to the body of Alex Calder?

CLIFFORD: Yeah, yeah. It was.

NEWT: You were how old? Eleven?

CLIFFORD: Yeah. I was young. Looking back, it’s kind of... kind of wild. You know?

NEWT: I mean, yeah. That sounds, like... super traumatizing, dude.

CLIFFORD: (evenly) Maybe. I wasn’t messed up about it at the time. I guess I... I didn’t really understand what was going on. I was too young. And my older brother shielded me from a lot of it.

NEWT: Did you and Alex know each other well?

CLIFFORD: Sure. We were neighbors, so we hung out a lot, with the other kids from the block. Best friends. Back then, it was like, whoever lived on your street, they were your best friends. And it was summer, so we were outside all the time. Biking, hiking, riding to the different streams, swimming or just throwing stuff. Making forts in the woods. Trying to build a dam in the stream to make ourselves a swimming pool. That kind of stuff.

NEWT: Right. Sounds fun.

CLIFFORD: Well, then Alex disappeared. The whole neighborhood went into lockdown that week. No one was allowed outside without adult supervision—we were 11, so you can imagine how everyone hated that. But my mom, she worked a lot. So I still had a little freedom. It was mostly my big brother Jackson who was around, so I ended up following him and his friends around that week. When they’d let me.

NEWT: Is that how you found his body?

CLIFFORD: Well, that’s the thing. I didn’t actually find the body myself. I was just the one who told the police about it.

NEWT: ...Oh. But you’re the one who told the police? It says you led them right to him.

CLIFFORD: Sure. Yes. But I didn’t find him.

NEWT: That was... your brother and his friends?

CLIFFORD: Yes... It was, really, kind of strange. That’s why it stuck with me.

NEWT: What happened?

CLIFFORD: Well, (sighs) I was biking around the neighborhood by myself. Because none of my friends were allowed out. It was a hot day... Like, really hot. August hot. Like the air is a roasting marshmallow, and it’s about to go from golden to on-fire. You know?
Well I was bored. So I went to find my brother, Jackson. He was hanging out at a friend’s house. When I got there, they were all about to leave. They let me tag along. It seemed like they were all following his one friend, but I didn’t really know what was happening. I just got on my little bike and tried to keep up.

We rode south, towards the Audubon. It was far, after a while—farther than I’d ever ridden with my friends, and the sun was beating down. We followed a stream next to the road, until it broke away from the road. Then, we got off our bikes and started walking. We followed the stream down to a pond in the woods. I’d never seen it before.

I was sweating like crazy by the time we hit the bottom of this little gully. It was cooler there, I remember. We stopped. Everyone was following my brother’s friend, and he didn’t seem to know where to go next. He looked all around, then started walking up a slope. We all followed after.

It was kind of creepy, a little, because it seemed like he didn’t actually... know where he was going. Like, he kept saying, “I think it’s this way... I think it’s this way.” It sounded like he was going on intuition, or something. Or going on a memory he couldn’t quite recall. I remember wondering if maybe he was in a trance.

We went down the other side of the slope, and he said, “It’s around here,” so the boys all started to fan out and look. I didn’t. I just stood by a tree, sort of watching, cause I still didn’t really know what we were doing.

Maybe this is my memory playing tricks, but the sun went behind a cloud. And just then I hear him —my brother’s friend, yelling. Not words. Just yelling. We all go running towards him, down the hill where he was standing, and I see this pool of water... Not much more than a big puddle, right? With some little trees growing up out the middle of it? I remember I didn’t actually realize what we were seeing, cause I was thinking it looked like a fairy pool or something, but then I see this... thing, this mound, lying there at his feet. It was... it was Alex.

He had a red sweater on, and it was covered in dirt. He was lying face down in the water, with his legs just out on the leaves. The boys turned him over to see, to make sure, but my brother Jackson stayed back with me. He made me turn and face the other way. So that I wouldn’t see. To this day, I’m pretty grateful for that.

NEWT: Yeah... I bet.

(beat)

NEWT: So then you were the one who notified the police?

CLIFFORD: Yeah. They thought I should be the one to do it, because Alex was my friend, or something. I don’t really know. My brother’s friend, I think he didn’t want to take credit for the finding.

NEWT: And what was his name, do you remember?

CLIFFORD: Yeah, of course. It was Hermie.

NEWT: (shocked) Hermie—?


NEWT: (disbelieving) Hermann Gottlieb was your brother’s friend? He was the one who found the body?
CLIFFORD: Yeah. Jackson and Hermie were best friend when they were kids. Do you know him?

NEWT: I... I do. Yeah.

SPONSOR BREAK #1

NEWT (VO): So. We had finally found our connection to the boy in the pool. There was a connection, all right. But, I will say... it really wasn’t the connection I was expecting.

From the moment we watched the Karla tape, my idea of Hermann’s childhood—his origin story, if you will—became shaky. I realized there was a lot more we didn’t know. A lot more he hadn’t, wouldn’t tell me. So, baby Hermann and his sister saw Hall-esque shadow figures; maybe he even thought they were following his family. Now, teenage Hermann was a Caitlin-Lightcap-style psychic, leading police to the body of a missing boy.

I didn’t know how to fit these younger versions of him into the picture of him as an adult.

Sometimes, a big revelation like this can make you feel like you don’t know someone at all. Like they’ve been hiding the “real” them from you all this time. Strangely enough, that wasn’t how I felt. I didn’t feel betrayed. I was just relieved. I had known all along that things weren’t lining up—like I was filling in a puzzle without the edge pieces.

Now, something finally made sense.

Crazy, of course. None of this made sense. But I felt like I had a shape for what it was I didn’t understand. I had finally found the edges.

(interlude music #5)

First, let’s go to Mako’s interview about my weird sleep-talking tape. She sat down with Dr. Wagner again, our rare manuscript expert from episode 204. You remember her—the one who cheerfully invited demons into her little bookstore, right in front of my eyes?

MAKO: So, I’m going to play a clip for you. This might not be anything, but I just want to give it a try.

DR. WAGNER: Okay.

MAKO: I just want you to tell me what you hear. What words, what language. If any.

DR. WAGNER: Hit it.

(audio from episode 2x03 plays—Newt sleep note)

(whispering)

(shift)

(semi-audible whispering)
DR. WAGNER: Could you play it again?

MAKO: (to Newt) She played it back a couple more times.

NEWT: Mhm.

MAKO: Do you recognize it?

DR. WAGNER: (sounding unsure) It sounds a little like... Something. Would you wait here a moment?

MAKO: Of course.

MAKO (VO): She got up to go look for something. I waited in her little workshop for a few minutes. Then she came back with a big, dusty book.

(muffled thump of book being placed on table)

DR. WAGNER: Have you heard of the Pilori, Ms. Mori?

MAKO: I don’t believe I have.

DR. WAGNER: They’re similar to fae—watchers.

MAKO: Like faeries?

DR. WAGNER: Yes. But not the Tinkerbell variety. More of the Rumplestiltskin persuasion.

MAKO: Oh. So what does that mean?

DR. WAGNER: In some folklore, fae, like Rumplestiltskin, are extremely malevolent. They trick and kill children, or trick their parents into signing them over to serve the fae.

The Pilori were a sect or group of faeries who believed that there was a certain power to certain words and phrases. A power to summon or bind. But, they believed that only certain special humans had the ability to channel this power.

MAKO: As in... spells?

DR. WAGNER: It’s a similar concept, I suppose. But the Pilori believed that only certain people were born with this ability. This verbal ability. That’s why they had an interest in certain human children. (sound of pages) You remember the story of Rumplestiltskin?

MAKO: Yes.

DR. WAGNER: He was one of the Pilori. In some versions of the story, he is interested in the child for this reason. In a sort of poetic parallel, the way the mother eventually gains control over him is by speaking his true name.

MAKO: Okay. I’m not sure I understand. What was this ability? What did the Pilori want... children for?

DR. WAGNER: No one really knows. The Pilori were never a terribly popular myth, but they pop up a few times. (sound of pages) Sometimes by that name, sometimes known simply as the watchers.
MAKO: Watchers of what, exactly?

DR. WAGNER: The children. The children they believed had this power. They themselves could never have this power, but they wanted access to it by proxy.

MAKO: Okay.

DR. WAGNER: The idea of powerful words always stuck with me. (taps page of book) It’s from this story here. It’s in Old English, but you can take a look.

MAKO: Thank you. (book sliding across table) It is an interesting idea.

DR. WAGNER: Powerful words, powerful speakers. Not so different from what you do, is it? As a reporter?

MAKO: And you? You’re the one with the book of spells.

DR. WAGNER: (laughs) This is not a spellbook. It’s a compilation of stories. And in this metaphor, I think I’d be the custodian of the texts.

MAKO: (laughs politely) So, this is an interesting myth. But what does it have to do with our recording?

DR. WAGNER: The phrase he was saying, it sounded a little like “Thes ár sægeth.” That’s this, here (sound of tapping on page), at the beginning of the incantation. It’s Anglo-Saxon.

MAKO: What does it mean?

DR. WAGNER: Ár means messenger, or herald. The other two words, you can still kind of hear in modern English. Thes is “this,” and sægeth is “sayeth,” or “says.” So the invocation is, “This messenger says...”

MAKO: And... what do they say?

DR. WAGNER: Well, in your recording, the speaker didn’t say anything else that I recognized. Just that, a few times. And frankly, I may be reaching. I just like this story.

MAKO: In the story, what does the messenger say?

DR. WAGNER: In this story, that invocation actually comes from the pixie—the Pilori watcher—to begin its tale. Then it tells a story of how it tricked a child to follow it into the woods, and warns the reader to watch their children more closely.

MAKO: Can I take a picture of this?

DR. WAGNER: Yes. But no flash, please.

NEWT (VO): Well that’s... interesting.

MAKO: You don’t sound like you bought it.

NEWT: Neither do you.

MAKO: I did like the story. And Dr. Wagner. She’s a character. But actually, I think this picture was most interesting.
NEWT: The picture? Of the book?

MAKO: Yeah. It was a super old book, and like she said, it was in Anglo-Saxon, so I couldn’t read it. But this symbol at the top of the page looked familiar...

NEWT: Oh yeah. That does look familiar. Hmm.

MAKO: I remember it from the pictures you took on the island.

NEWT: Oh, yeah! Wow. Good eye, Lady Danger!

MAKO: *(chuffed)* Thank you.

NEWT: I remember it now. I think Dr. G said it was some kind of cult symbol. I’ll show it to him and ask if he knows about it.

MAKO: You have a lot to ask him about, huh?

NEWT: Yeah. I do.

MAKO: Have you called him since you got back?

NEWT: Not yet. But I guess it’s time.

*(interlude music #3)*

*(sound of door opening)*

*(someone stands up)*

HERMANN: Newton. Good to see you back.

NEWT: Hi! (...) It’s good to see you too, Hermann.

*(footsteps with cane)*

*(pause)*

NEWT (VO): Dr. G crossed the river for a visit. Like Mako said, we had a lot to catch up on.

*(interlude music #5)*

I updated Dr. G on my vacation and my rest cure. Once he was reassured that my brain was back in working order, we got to the good stuff.

NEWT: Have you ever heard of the Pilori?

HERMANN: Yes. They’re fae folk.

NEWT: Yes. Our rare books expert showed us this page from a book about them. Does any of this look familiar?

*(sound of paper)*

*(beat)*
HERMANN: She showed you this, in connection to what?

NEWT: Mm... It’s a long story.

HERMANN: The symbol at the top of this page is the symbol of the Cult of Tiamat.

NEWT: Yeah. We thought it might be. I remembered you mentioning it in the bunker on the island.

HERMANN: Yes. This manuscript looks extremely old. When does it date?

NEWT: She said the 11th century.

HERMANN: Hm. A little late for Anglo-Saxon.

NEWT: (*teasing*) That’s what I said.

HERMANN: ...In any case, much earlier than the Cult of Tiamat was formed.

NEWT: Do you know a lot about them?

HERMANN: Not as much as I’d like. But I’ve been... Well, they’ve been cropping up lately. Particularly the symbol.

NEWT: How so?

HERMANN: I’ve been cleaning house in Lincoln. Going through a lot of old boxes. Things belonging to my father. I’ve seen this symbol in a few places.

NEWT: Among his things?

HERMANN: His papers. Some letters. Other places as well.

NEWT: Really?

HERMANN: Yes.

NEWT: Was your dad, like, a member?

HERMANN: Of the cult? I doubt it.

NEWT: Ah. (*pause*) Could we maybe... take a look at the letters?

HERMANN: You’re welcome to try. I wasn’t able to make much of them. I doubt you will be able to either.

NEWT (VO): I wanted to bring up what we found about the boy in the pool—to say the name “Alex Calder” to him and see what his face would do. But now that the moment was here, I hesitated.

I decided to wait. I wanted more first. I wanted to keep digging—to talk to Clifford’s big brother, Jackson. I didn’t like the idea of him barging into my investigation before I finished building it, and then trying to talk his way out again.

I knew he would be upset with me for going behind his back, but I had to.

So for now, this secret stayed with me; and the rest, with him.
NEWT (VO): There was still one other thing we had to talk to Dr. G about that afternoon.

MAKO: So, as you know, we get a lot of messages from people claiming to be Vanessa.

HERMANN: Yes.

MAKO: Well, since the last season, the size of our audience has spiked. There have been a lot more “Vanessa” messages, too.

NEWT: I don’t know how likely you think she would be to contact you via the podcast...

HERMANN: Not likely.

NEWT: ...Right.

MAKO: Well, just to be sure, we pulled the ones that seemed strange to us. I’m going to play them for you.

HERMANN: (clipped) Go ahead.

(click)

(message plays)

FEMALE VOICE: (deep) Hermann it’s me. Your wife. I miss you. I have important information about the painting. I sent it to you. Call me back [bleeped]...

MAKO: Anything?

HERMANN: No.

MAKO: No?

HERMANN: (dismissive) That person sounds nothing like my wife.

MAKO: Okay. (click) Next one.

(message plays)

FEMALE VOICE: (breathy) Hermann, it’s Nessa. They finally found me. I need your help... I’m being held. I’m in a compound in [bleeped]. Please hurry!

HERMANN: (mild disdain) That’s not her. She would never call herself “Nessa.”

MAKO: Fair enough. Last one.

(click)

(message plays)

COMPUTERIZED FEMALE VOICE: Hermann G, please don’t worry. It’s me, wolf’s sister. I left you something under the North Star.

(someone moves in chair)
HERMANN: Play that again.

MAKO: The—the robot one?

HERMANN: Yes. Play it again.

MAKO: Okay.

*COMPUTERIZED FEMALE VOICE*: Hermann G, please don’t worry. It’s me, wolf’s sister. I left you something under the North Star.

HERMANN: Could you send me that, please?

MAKO: Sure?

NEWT: *(cautiously)* Why?

HERMANN: *(low)* I think that might be from her.

**SPONSOR BREAK #2**

*(interlude music #4)*

NEWT (VO): Dr. G’s reaction to the message took me by complete surprise. He seemed shocked himself. We had gone through messages like these before, but we never included the recordings in the episodes, because, well, they were never anything. All fakes. But this one, apparently, was different.

Hermann said explaining would be difficult, so he asked me to come to his house in Lincoln the next day. He said rather than tell me, he would show me. So I borrowed Mako’s car and made the drive up for a second time.

*(sound of front door closing)*

*(footsteps, interior door opening)*

NEWT: Wow. It looks totally different in here.

HERMANN: Yes. Marian has been helping me redecorate.

NEWT (VO): Last time I visited, Hermann had just moved back into his parents’ old house in Lincoln. It was sort of empty and hollow then; all shiny hardwood floors and dust, all the furniture shrouded in plastic like big, motionless ghosts. The plastic was mostly off now, and the walls were repainted in colors besides white. I could definitely see the touch of a younger, more hip person in some of the color choices.

There were some paintings and framed prints decorating the walls. No family photos, though. Made me honestly wonder whether the Gottliebs had any.

*(walking)*

NEWT: Love the paint. And the rugs. Much less...

HERMANN: Impersonal?
NEWT: (politely) ...Uninhabited?

HERMANN: Fair. Marian has also been helping me reorganize my personal files.

(Door opens)

“...through here.” Hermann held the door for Newt as they stepped into the kitchen.

“So what’s this thing you can only show, not tell?”

“Several things, actually,” Hermann said. “I’ll fetch them.”

Hermann disappeared through the swinging door on the other side of the room. Newt looked around the empty, half-lit kitchen. The black and white tile gleamed a dull green, reflecting the indirect light from the back yard. The kitchen was on the north side of the house, so it received no direct sunlight. But it was just past noon on a bright September day, and the whole meadow outside was aglow. A warm breeze was coming in the window above the long kitchen table, just ajar. Newt wandered towards it, absentmindedly rolling down his sleeves. As bright as it was outside, it was shady and cool in the Gottlieb house.

Now that the house was furnished, Newt felt less like an intruder in a museum. It was less like a museum storage space, and more like, well, a house. Hermann, too, seemed more relaxed.

Newt breathed the clear air for a moment. The air of the New England woods was so different from Florida's heavy ocean air. A fly ambled across the screen outside. Soon winter would come, and that fly would be dead. No—flies did not live that long in the first place, Newt thought. That fly would not even live to see October.

There was a noise and a sound of frustration from a few rooms over. Newt smiled vaguely and leaned on the table. The smell of the air. That was one of those things you didn’t realize you’d miss. Like the taste of the tap water from home. That, he had missed. Florida tap water tasted foreign and awful, like alligator sweat. It was good to be home.

*Tap water.* You missed such unexpected things.

“Do you need a hand?” Newt called. It occurred to him that carrying boxes was hard when one hand was using a cane.

“I’m alright,” came the reply. There was another clunking shifting sound, then silence. A moment later, he heard Hermann’s footsteps. Hermann pushed the door open with his back and came in, a cardboard box under his arm. He set it down on one of the kitchen chairs. Newt watched him bend to do so.

He had gotten a haircut in Newt’s absence. On the lower half of his scalp, the cut was so close that it looked like speckled white sand. Newt rubbed the back of his own neck.

Hermann straightened up. “Please,” he said, slightly breathless. “Sit.”

Newt did so.

“Are you recording?”

“Uh... Yes. I just let it run, and then edit it later.” Newt looked up at him, tapping at the recorder in his breast pocket. “Did you... did you want me to pause it?”
“No, no. Nothing like that,” Hermann said, sparing a small glance for the recorder in which Newt caught the fleeting discomfort they were both, today, agreeing to ignore. “I only wanted to offer before we... get ‘into it,’ as you might say. Could I get you something to drink? Coffee, tea?”


Hermann disappeared behind him, the tripled sound of his step bouncing off the tile. Newt listened as he opened a cabinet and, with a slide and then the slightest ring, took out a glass. Outside, sparrows were chattering around the nest they had built in the great hole of the oak tree. Newt rested his head in his hand, looking not at the box, not at Hermann, but outside. He didn’t know what was inside the box. He didn’t speculate. Surely, only more questions. With his other hand, he lightly touched the button on his shirt cuff.

Yesterday, Hermann had been visibly relieved to see Newt again. Before leaving the studio, he had given Newt something: his suit jacket. “In the confusion after the gallery and the—emergency room,” Hermann said, “Your jacket ended up with me.”

Newt had thanked him and taken it. It was not until later, when he got home, that Newt noticed the button. The loose button on his sleeve had been sewn securely back into place. The thread was black, but not quite the same black as the thread of the other buttons.

Behind Newt, Hermann set the glass down on the counter. “Tap or filtered water?” he said.

“Tap is good,” Newt said, eyes still fixed on the tree outside. He heard the faucet come on, the glass fill. Slowly he twisted the button on his shirtsleeve.

Hermann returned and set the glass down beside him.

NEWT: So. Tell me. What’ve you got? A new black tape? It feels like it’s been forever.

HERMANN: Fortunately—or unfortunately, depending on your perspective—no.

(sound of a box full of objects being placed on a table)

NEWT: What is all this stuff?

HERMANN: Personal effects.

NEWT: (amused) Only you would refer to a box of what appears to be precious mementos as “personal effects.”

HERMANN: If you know so much about what’s in the box, I suppose I don’t have to show it you?

NEWT: (teasing) Touchy, touchy.

NEWT (VO): I sat in the tidy, tiled kitchen while he rooted through a cardboard box. It was a long kitchen table, meant for a large family. The whole first floor was fully furnished now, and what was more, it felt lived-in. If I walked in as a stranger, I would have said a whole family lived there.

I remembered Robert Motherwell’s creepy interview, when he said Dr. Gottlieb was “a lonely man” who “liked to be alone.” Which part of that was true? Former, latter? Both, neither?

As I sat there, I wondered about all that furniture, the framed prints instead of photos.
About the kind of person who moves from a city apartment, back to the family homestead, alone. I wondered about the kind of life Dr. Gottlieb wished his house was home to.

Then I thought about the tall men he and his sister saw outside their screen porch, all those years ago—not 15 feet away from where I sat now.

Finally, he found what he was looking for.

HERMANN: (subdued) Here it is.

(sound of something being set down on the table)

(object being slid across table)

NEWT: (surprised) Is this... your wedding album?

HERMANN: Yes.

NEWT (VO): Wow. Here was a part of Hermann’s past I never expected—or wanted?—access to. I flipped through the photos slowly. Seeing Dr. G like this—so young, in a tux, hair slicked back, smiling... I mean, the guy never smiles. It was weird. I almost couldn’t believe this was the same person.

Hermann and Vanessa Gottlieb were married in the fall at the Fairmont le Château Frontenac, a beautiful castle-like hotel in Quebec City.

NEWT: God, what year was this?


NEWT: Ah. I should have been able to guess that by the bridesmaids’ hairdos. So you were how old? You don’t look old enough to be marriageable. Nevermind a PhD.

HERMANN: I finished my doctorate soon after.

NEWT: Ah. Just Mr. Gottlieb. (shudders) Ooh. Nevermind. Do not like the way that rolls of the tongue.

HERMANN: (disapprovingly) Mm.

NEWT: So, this... has something to do with the message?

HERMANN: (clears throat) Yes.

NEWT: Do you know why Vanessa would call herself “the wolf’s sister?”

HERMANN: Not “the” wolf. Her message says “it’s wolf’s sister.”

NEWT: Okay...?

HERMANN: I believe it’s actually Woolf’s sister. Virginia Woolf had a sister.

NEWT: And she was...?

HERMANN: ...Named Vanessa. Vanessa Bell. (sound of page turning) Vanessa—Gottlieb—was
quite fond of Virginia Woolf. Is quite fond.

NEWT: (...) Okay. Was there something else? Something you needed to bring me here to show me this?

HERMANN: Are you familiar with Shakespeare’s Sonnet 116?

NEWT: Uh...

HERMANN: “Let me not to the marriage of true minds, Admit impediments. Love is not love, Which alters when it alteration finds, Or bends with the remover to remove.” (...) Etcetera.

NEWT: (hesitant) Sounds familiar?

HERMANN: Vanessa read me that poem, here. At our wedding. It was her vows. To me.

NEWT: Oh. I see. (pause) Um, that’s sweet? But what does...

HERMANN: The North Star. She mentions it in her message. One of the central metaphors of the poem is a nautical metaphor: “It is an ever-fixed mark, That looks on tempests and is never shaken; It is the star to every wand’ring bark.” Steering a ship by a star.

NEWT: Okay. But those lines don’t actually mention “the North Star.”

HERMANN: It’s a commonly accepted interpretation. One I know Vanessa shared. Shares.

NEWT: (doubtful) Okay.

(sound of tapping on page)

HERMANN: Under the North Star. She means here. She’s left me a message here.

NEWT: At the hotel?

HERMANN: Yes.

NEWT: Hm. Maybe...

HERMANN: The fact is, no one else would know these signals but her. It is true I do not know her intent. But the message could not be from anyone else. It is at a discursive and connotative level which could not be faked.

NEWT: (...) I’m not sure I understand.

HERMANN: There’s something else here as well.

NEWT: Yeah?

(sound of paper on table)

HERMANN: These are some of my father’s documents. Letters.

(sound of papers sliding)

NEWT: The symbol...

HERMANN: (grim) Yes. I found these letters hidden behind a photo in a frame. I had never seen
them before. I don’t know what they... I don’t know what they pertain to. I have other materials of my father’s as well. I’m sure it’s all of interest to you, somehow or other. I’ll have Marian bring it over tomorrow.

NEWT: Thank you.

HERMANN: Certainly.

(beat)

NEWT: Was there... something else?

HERMANN: Was there?

NEWT: You just look like you’re thinking. About something else. What’s up?

HERMANN: It’s the... *(reluctant, but saying it)* Well, the symbol. I did some more research on it last night.

NEWT: Okay. Can you tell us what you found?

HERMANN: In parallel with their beliefs about incantations and invocations, the Pilori believed that symbols had power. They held that there were certain sigils that could summon or bind, like invocations.

NEWT: Okay...

HERMANN: Take Rumplestiltskin, your scholar’s example. He was a watcher. The folklore surrounding him indicates that if you learned his true name, you’d be granted power over him. In fact, in the original legend, it was a symbol, not a spoken name.

NEWT: So, if you had his symbol, you’d get some sort of power over him? Like stealing his Social Security Number?

HERMANN: His—yes. *(small laugh)* I imagine that in some translation along the way, the word for “name” and “symbol” were conflated.

NEWT: That’s interesting. Does that help you understand your father’s relationship to this symbol, or...?


NEWT: Where?

HERMANN: Vanessa.

NEWT: Really?

HERMANN: She wore a ring that she would never take off. It was gold, with a flat gold top. No stone. No marking. But she never took it off. Never. Not for swimming, washing dishes, gardening. If I asked about it, she told me it was simply a family heirloom. I often wondered about it, but I let it be. Maybe her reticence makes it sound important, but I never interpreted it that way. There were many things about which Vanessa was reticent.

Well, once we were traveling in Prague. She needed an emergency appendectomy. Before her surgery, when she was under general anesthesia, the nurse took all her jewelry off, including the
ring. When I was sitting by her bed in the recovery room, I saw it in a plastic bag. It was on the table next to her bed. I could see the inside of the ring, under the gold circle. There was a symbol engraved on the inside of the ring. It was this symbol.

NEWT: Oh.

HERMANN: Vanessa woke up, and before she said a word, before she even finished blinking, she was reaching for her hand to check if the ring was still on. She got very agitated when she realized it was gone. I helped her put it back on, but she was quite upset that someone had taken it off... At the time, I simply put it down to post-surgery anxiety.

NEWT: But now...?

HERMANN: I don’t know what to make of it. It was the symbol. It was the Cult of Tiamat.

NEWT: Why do you think Vanessa would have had that?

HERMANN: (worried) I have no idea.

NEWT: But you really think she left you that message?

HERMANN: I know she did.

NEWT: Are you going to go to the hotel and find out?

HERMANN: What else is there to do?

(interlude music #6)

NEWT (VO): What indeed?

The next day, Marian brought us a few boxes of Lars Gottlieb’s files. There were journals, papers, and research materials spanning about forty years. A lot of it was anthropological and mythological research. There were some behavioral studies on tribes untouched by outside civilization. But I didn’t find anything related to anything that might be related to the Black Tapes, except tangentially.

Nothing but the letters. As Hermann said, he found them behind a picture frame. This is a pretty intriguing place to keep your mail, so I was already pretty interested in what the letters might contain. They were old, typed, undated, but if I had to guess, I’d say 70’s.

It looked like Gottlieb Sr. had been communicating with someone in Istanbul—the postmark and stamp were Turkish. Hermann’s name was mentioned in all three letters.

Whoever was writing to Lars about Hermann was mostly concerned with logistics like room, board, dates, travel. There was a mention of preparing the boy for “the mantle of the dragon.” And at the top of each page, the symbol was stamped like a logo: the sign of the Cult of Tiamat.

MAKO: These sound like he was preparing to send his son off to boarding school.

NEWT: Right. Dragon-worshipping cult school. All German boys gotta go sometime.

MAKO: I mean why would he be communicating with these Tiamat people in the first place?

NEWT: It does track with what Karla told us about Lars bringing Hermann special, weird presents.
MAKO: I suppose so.

NEWT: But Hermann says he never went to any Tiamat school. Or even Turkey. He went to a totally normal school.

MAKO: So maybe these plans fell through for some reason.

NEWT (VO): I called Dr. G and left a message. The next day, we came into the office to find a message in our inbox—not from him.

MAKO: Newt.

NEWT: Yeah?

MAKO: Check the show email. There’s a message from an encrypted sender. Audio file.

NEWT: Oh. Kind of looks like the...

MAKO: Like the Vanessa message. Yeah.

NEWT: (softly) Uh-oh.

MAKO: I’m going to play it.

COMPUTERIZED FEMALE VOICE: Don’t go. They know.

(interlude music #5)

NEWT (VO): I called Dr. G right away to tell him. But I didn’t get a reply. I waited a few hours, but I was too agitated. I called again. I, uh... I called a bunch more times.

Then I called Marian at the Institute. I asked where he was. She said he had driven to Canada for a short business trip.

“To Quebec City?” I asked. “Yes,” she said. She didn’t know exactly when he left, or how long he planned to stay.

I asked why he wasn’t answering his phone. She said she didn’t know.

MAKO: You’re serious?

NEWT: Why wouldn’t I be?

MAKO: Newt...

NEWT: I’m going. Sorry. (...) I’ll call you when I land. If he got on the highway this morning, I should get to the city around the same time.

MAKO: And if he left yesterday?

NEWT: I’ll find him.

(beat)

MAKO: Okay. Be careful.

NEWT (VO): Next time: The Black Tapes takes a field trip up north.
See you then.

(outro music plays)
NEWT GEISZLER: Welcome to Season Two of the Black Tapes Podcast.

This season, we’re continuing our exploration of belief and the search for truth, and our profile of the enigmatic Dr. Hermann Gottlieb. We are examining his collection of unsolved cases, pursuing the theory that they are connected.

Our story progresses in order, week by week. So, if you’re a first-time listener, welcome to the show! You’ll have to start at episode one if you want to have the faintest idea what I’m talking about.

NEWT (VO): We ended our last episode on a sort of cliffhanger. My apologies, kids.

I flew up to Quebec City in a state of, let’s say, semi-panic. Did my break help me relax? A bit. But since returning to work, I confess, the paranoia was creeping back up. I’m hovering around four hours of sleep per night, at press time. Nothing for July Newt to sneeze at, but nothing for, say, a healthy person to envy.

In short: I was a little stressed. Dr. Gottlieb had skipped town at the urging of a message he believed was from his long-missing wife, Vanessa Gottlieb. He interpreted the message as telling him to return to the hotel where they were married, 16 years ago, in Quebec City, Canada.

A few days after that, we received a similar message, with a similar computerized voice. It said simply: “Don’t go. They know.”

But Hermann was already gone. And he wasn’t answering his phone.

NEWT (VO): The (bad French pronunciation) Château Frontenac is quite the chateau. It’s so big you can actually see it from the air. Quebec City is a fortified island, a web of cobblestone streets winding up and down the main hill. The Château Frontenac sits at the top of all that, towering over the city below. Its architecture and scale can only be described as Hogwartsty. I could easily imagine Jack Nicholson wreaking havoc in those halls, or the ghosts trapped in there—drifting down the endless corners, wandering for eternity and never finding a way out. (Was I projecting?)

Anyway, when I got there, reception told me that Dr. Gottlieb hadn’t checked in yet. I was relieved. So I waited in the lobby, in a leather armchair with some serious sink, for over an hour.
(swish of revolving door)

(creak of leather chair)

NEWT: Hermann!

(quick footsteps)

NEWT: Hermann—

HERMANN: (getting louder as mic approaches) Newton... What are you doing here?

NEWT: (exasperated but relieved) Well, I could have told you from Boston, if you were answering your phone...

HERMANN: I turned it off. (...) Did you fly here?

NEWT: Yes—

HERMANN: (distant) I thought you hated flying.

NEWT: I don’t much care for it. Don’t really care for driving, either. Just stay in one place, that’s what I say. Listen—

HERMANN: (brisk again) I don’t know why you came, Newton. If you’ll excuse me. I have something to attend to.

NEWT: Hermann, wait! (hurried footsteps) I came to tell you something. Will you listen for one second?

HERMANN: (stopping) (exasperated) Yes?

NEWT: We got another message. Same computerized voice. It said, “Don’t go. They know.”

HERMANN: (...) 

NEWT: So I...

HERMANN: Very well. Thank you for informing me. If you’ll excuse me.

(footsteps with cane)

NEWT: I don’t think it’s safe! Hermann, please!

(Hermann keeps walking)

NEWT: (whispering) God dammit. (louder) Wait for me!

(footsteps as Newt follows)

NEWT (VO): Hermann checked in while I hovered. The interior of the hotel, I should mention, was no less extravagant than the exterior. All mahogany and mirrors, richly colored rugs, and chandeliers dimmed enough to make you think it was cocktail hour. Which, actually, it could have been by then. The sun was setting outside by the time Hermann finished checking in. He headed for the elevators.

HERMANN: I’m going to the top floor. I suppose... I suppose we are going to the top
NEWT: I’m sorry, dude. Like, I respect your privacy and all, like, I know I haven’t always in the past, but I really do; and I know this is a sensitive one, being as it’s your, like, honeymoon suite from over a decade ago. I get it. But I am coming with you.

HERMANN: *(clears throat)* Since there seems to be nothing I can do to stop you, let’s go.

NEWT: Believe me... I also hope I’m wrong.

(*elevator dings*)

(*footsteps*)

HERMANN: *(to others in elevator)* Excuse us. *(to Newt)* I’m quite certain you are. But what about?

NEWT: This being... a trap. Or whatever.

(*doors close*)

NEWT: *(whispering)* Or whatever other worst-case scenarios my mind may or may not have conjured up in the last twelve hours.

HERMANN: *(low, delicately sarcastic)* I shudder to think.

(*elevator dings*)

(*others exit*)

(*pause*)

NEWT: *(hushed)* I know you think the message is definitely her, but what if—

HERMANN: *(angry murmur)* It is her. Will you drop it?

(*elevator dings*)

(*others exit*)

(*pause*)

NEWT: *(quiet)* Is it the same...

HERMANN: Yes. I requested the same room.

NEWT: ...Ah.

NEWT *(VO)*: We got off on the top floor, floor 18. The door dinged shut behind us. If I wasn’t feeling nervous already, the long, quiet hallway did nothing to alleviate my angst. Stanley Kubrick couldn’t have built it better. The garish patterned carpet snaked away impossibly far, past door after silent wooden door. The elevator dinged away, more and more distant down the shaft, and then all was muffled hotel quiet.

We made our way silently down the hallway. Of course, his room was all the way at the end.

(*key card slide*)
(key card being pulled out)

(mechanical click)

(someone takes a breath)

HERMANN: (murmur) Everything will be alright, Newton.

NEWT: (exhales quietly)

(door opens)

(two sets of footsteps, slow, muffled on carpet)

(door closes heavily behind them)

(beat)

NEWT: (quietly, into mic) Okay... first impressions: nothing immediately jumping out to murder us...

HERMANN: (tense sarcasm) I did notice that.

(more footsteps)

(creak of opening door)

NEWT: Nothing in the bathroom. I’m checking the closet.

HERMANN: (from other room) Go ahead.

(rumble of sliding closet door)

NEWT: Nothing in here...

(wire hangers clattering lightly)

NEWT: ...Just an extra duvet. And the safe.

(rumble and clack of closet door closing)

NEWT: Anything out there?

(footsteps as he walks into the main room)

NEWT: Sheesh, what a view. Is there anything you... Hermann?

HERMANN: (...)

(footsteps stop)

NEWT: Is everything all... (gasps) Holy [expletive bleeped]. Is that—

HERMANN: Yes. It is.

NEWT: Oh my god. (...) Oh my god. It’s red. Not green. It’s the real one.

HERMANN: (strained) Possibly. But you—
(hurried footsteps)

HERMANN: (urgent) Newton!

(bedsprings creak)

HERMANN: What are you doing?

(click and slide of something being removed from the wall)

(object hits fabric bedspread)

NEWT: It’s the painting.

HERMANN: Newton. That is a priceless artifact. It is also highly sought after by the international authorities. Please, for the love of god...

NEWT (VO): I couldn’t believe my eyes. There, in some subpar poster frame hanging above the hotel bed, was Il Sorriso Capovolto. Oil on canvas. Edges torn.

Of course it occurred to me right away that this might be a replica—maybe it was just a convincing fake. How would I know? I don’t have an eye for art forgery. But I have spent a fair amount of time looking at this particular work. A fair amount looking at a particular section of it.

My eye went to it immediately.

The book in the painting was red. The one Dr. Byrne described. Here it was: the code that had fascinated scholars, cultists, and podcast reporters for generations. At first glance, it looked right to me.

I had no idea how Vanessa Gottlieb could have gotten her hands on this, but my mind was racing with the possibilities.

In that moment, if I had been a betting man, I would have said it was the real one.

It was high up on the wall. I pulled it down and set it on the bed for a closer look. Dr. G hurried over to see. He didn’t believe it was the real one, but he still didn’t like me manhandling it.

HERMANN: Please, for the love of god be careful...

NEWT: It’s the real one. On my god. Hermann. Did your wife leave this for you? How the hell did she find it?

HERMANN: I have no idea, but Newton. We have no reason to believe this was left here by Vanessa, nor that it is the actual five-hundred-year-old Renaissance masterpiece that has been missing for over twenty years, nor any combination of these two theories...

(beat)

HERMANN: Newton?

NEWT: (distant) Yeah?

HERMANN: You’re staring. Do you see something?

HERMANN: What about it?

NEWT: I don’t... I don’t think this is the real one.

HERMANN: No? Why not.

NEWT: The code isn’t the same.

HERMANN: Isn’t it?

NEWT: No. Look, it’s words. It’s just words. Maybe it’s decoded. Or a decoy.

HERMANN: I... I don’t think I see what you’re seeing.

(tap on plastic)

HERMANN: (wincing) Newton, please!


HERMANN: This is obviously a flimsy frame someone bought at a craft store—

NEWT: (interrupting) Anyway—right there.

HERMANN: I don’t understand.

NEWT: In the book, Hermann. It says:

When the hour is at hand

The few, the one, will know

When the call is given

He appears.

HERMANN: (...)

NEWT: ...And then the numbers. 101364326 (...) Not the best poetry I’ve ever read, but not the worst.

(beat)

NEWT: Hermann?

(footsteps with cane, moving away from the mic)

NEWT: Dude? Where are you going?

(slide and swish of Hermann closing the curtains)

NEWT: Uh...

HERMANN: Sun damage.
NEWT: Okay... (pause) Spoken like someone who thinks this might be... the genuine article...

HERMANN: I’ll (...) wait for verification. But I’d rather err on the side of not damaging the five-hundred year old Renaissance painting, if you don’t mind.

NEWT: Okay, okay, I’ll put it down...

(footsteps—footsteps halt)

HERMANN: (urgent) Wait—stop.

NEWT: What?! Put it down, or don’t put it down?

HERMANN: No! Look. There’s something written on the back of the frame.

NEWT: Really?

HERMANN: Yes, on the cardboard. It looks like num—

(knocking on the door)

(tense pause)

NEWT: (whispering) Are you expecting someone?

HERMANN: (hissing) Absolutely not.

NEWT: What should we—

(knocking)

HERMANN: (quickly, hushed) Take a picture of the back. With your phone. Now. (louder) Just a moment, please!

(sound of Newt rummaging)

(more knocking)

(sound of iPhone camera shutter)

NEWT: (whispering) Okay. Got it.

HERMANN: (hushed) Get the painting out of sight. (louder) I’m coming!

(footsteps with cane cross the carpet)

(pause)

(doors open)

HERMANN: (muffled in other room) Yes?

MAN: (speaking in French) Excusez-moi, monsieur. La réception vous appelle, mais votre téléphone de chambre ne sonne pas. On a besoin de vous parler, monsieur, en bas.

HERMANN: (in French, Britishly overpronounced) À propos de?
MAN: Je vous en prie. On vous l’explique en bas.

HERMANN: La téléphone n’a pas sonné. What is this about?

MAN: (heavy Quebecois accent) Zere is some confusion about the rooms. We apologize deeply for this. It seems another couple was booked in this room on this night. They are waiting in the lobby.

HERMANN: (...)

HERMANN: Very well. (severely) This is a great inconvenience, I’m sure you know. I’ll need a moment.

MAN: Certainly. Vous êtes seul ici?

HERMANN: Oui.

MAN: Est-ce que je pourrai entrer pour faire un check sur le téléphone?

HERMANN: (still severe) Non. Excusez-moi.

MAN: Bien sûr.

(door closes)

NEWT: (exhales) What was that about?

HERMANN: I’m needed downstairs. Apparently there’s a problem with the room reservation.

NEWT (VO): It was a debacle. Apparently, the hotel had accidentally double-booked the suite that weekend. The other couple was downstairs, kicking up some kind of fuss. On the surface, was it suspicious? Nothing about the situation suggested it was anything other than bad luck. But it did not escape my notice that Hermann told me to hide the painting and, by extension, myself. My French is pretty rusty, but I know he lied to the man at the door and said that he was there alone. If I thought there was something to worry about, I wasn’t the only one.

Hermann and I then found ourselves in the awkward position of possessing a possibly-priceless stolen painting while resolving a bureaucratic vacation hiccup. The hotel apologized profusely for the confusion. They offered to put us up for free in restitution. They were not impressed when we asked for separate rooms.

——— OFF THE RECORD ————

RECEPTIONIST: (neat Parisian accent) I’m sorry, no. Two rooms would simply not be possible. The original reservation was only for one room. For you, Monsieur Gottlieb, we can make arrangements, but not—

HERMANN: (dangerously) No, no. After all this, you cannot seriously expect us to—

NEWT: Um yes—sorry—excuse us a moment, would you?

RECEPTIONIST: (indistinct)

(shuffling footsteps)
NEWT: *undertone* Hermann, it’s fine.

HERMANN: *angry undertone* It’s ridiculous. They fumble the bloody rooms and then can’t provide the necessary solution—

NEWT: No, it’s fine, I don’t mind—

HERMANN: It is not, it is absolutely not fine—it will be *impossible* for you to find accommodations at the last minute on a holiday weekend, do not pretend—what do you suggest? Do you propose to sleep in your *car*? Oh wait, you haven’t *got* a car. It—

NEWT: Hermann! Listen! It’s fine. Let them give us one room.

HERMANN: (...)

NEWT: *Why* would I need a place to sleep? I don’t, remember?

HERMANN: (...)

NEWT: *quiet* Hm?

HERMANN: I thought you...

NEWT: You thought I what?

HERMANN: *deep breath* I thought you... that your condition was improving.

NEWT: (...)

NEWT: So-so. *quiet* Three or four hours on average.

HERMANN: Newton...

NEWT: *rallying* I’ll be fine. Take the room. We’ll put our stuff up there, wait for the painting people, eat a ritzy dinner in the lounge. Then you can go back upstairs, I’ll stay in the lounge working for the rest of the night, while you sleep. And who knows? Maybe I’ll get lucky, and doze off.

*(pause)*

HERMANN: (...) All right.

NEWT: Yeah?

HERMANN: Yes.

*——— RESUME RECORD ————*

NEWT (VO): ...I won’t tell you which one of us asked for separate rooms.

Once we worked it out, we contacted the ISG. They were going to either love us for discovering a second painting or hate us for opening Pandora’s international jurisdiction box. After some kerfuffle, the FBI and someone from the museum were sent up on the quickest flight.

They didn’t arrive until late in the evening. Dr. G and I had been too nervous to keep
the painting unattended in the room, so we put it in the room safe and sat on our hands waiting. We were pretty relieved to hand it over.

I asked the ISG guy if it was legit. He said, on first glance, yes. But it would take lab work and real experts to authenticate.

They brought it back to Boston that night. We bought tickets for the first flight out the next morning.

It was late when Newton let himself back into the room. He opened the door as quietly as he could, Hermann could tell. But the click of the key card still woke him.

He kept his eyes closed as Newton walked across the room, set his laptop down, unzipped his suitcase, and rooted around for something. He found it, pulled it out—it sounded like it was his laptop charger. Then there was the quiet thunk of him plugging it into an outlet.

He clicked rapidly on his laptop, waking it back up. “Come on, come on...” he murmured, almost inaudible.

Abruptly, the AC unit turned off. Silence washed around them.

Hermann opened his eyes.

The moon was high outside the wide window. Hermann was facing away from it, facing the bathroom. Newt sat at the window behind him. The blue light of nighttime was flooding in, filling the room and washing through the open door of the bathroom. Hermann looked up at the mirror above the sink. In it he could see the night sky, the distant hills beyond the city, and Newton. He was a dark silhouette against the sky outside, except his face, bathed in white computer light. He slouched, staring with blank, heavy-lidded focus at his computer.

Hermann watched him for a moment. He could see two tiny screens reflected in his glasses, but it was too far to see what he was working on; too far and too many refractions from reality. He closed his eyes again.

The quiet sounds of Newton working gave a shape to the darkness. Without the AC, he was the loudest sound in the room. Hermann tried to half-focus on the sounds, and let them lull him back to sleep—but instead, he felt rather awake.

He could hear everything. His quiet breath, the tiniest sound of him adjusting, or a soft sigh of frustration; the strokes of his mouse, his fingers on the keyboard.

It started to feel like Newton was right next to his head, clacking on a typewriter in Hermann’s ear. Hermann almost considered sitting up and asking him to go back to the lounge, when he heard a quiet snap of the laptop shutting.

Now the sound of Newton getting up, shuffling across the carpet in front of the window. He sat down—in the armchair, Hermann thought, the one in the corner. It hadn’t looked very comfortable. But maybe he had finally grown tired.

There was a quiet raveling and then two thumps, one after the other, as Newton took his shoes off and tossed them onto the carpet. Then a quiet clack as he took off his glasses and set them down on the other nightstand—the one that would have been his, if he had been sleeping on the other side of the bed.
Hermann was thinking about that side; about the person-sized expanse of bed that was now the only thing between the two of them. Newton would never put himself there, and they both knew it. But the possibility that he could, the parallel universe where he might, opened a terrifying tension.

Hermann tried to breathe steadily, silently. He had never felt further from sleep.

There was a slow slide of fabric on fabric as Newton slouched in the chair. He let out a long, exhausted sigh.

Newt was thinking about that space too. It was like a space that couldn’t exist, or one that should be conceptual only. Like an electron orbital or a DMZ. He closed his eyes, rubbing the bridge of his nose where his glasses had made their daily indents. If he was going to sleep—and he felt like he might, actually—this armchair was the place.

Eyes still closed, he started on a sleep exercise he’d learned from Dr. Mitchell, and then modified for his own purposes. It often worked. He would pick a location he knew well and then visualize it as clearly as he could. He rebuilt the place in his mind’s eye, down to the last detail. Everything he could remember. The internally directed focus was a great help. If his brain was obligingly quiet, he could drift off within minutes.

Usually he would describe his grandparents’ old house, or sometimes, his uncle’s house in Florida. But tonight, his mind swung like a compass needle southwards. To Lincoln, Massachusetts.

His mind wandered down the hall he had seen only twice, transplanted there like a dream. What was there to remember? Every doorway opened on a bright hardwood floor, spotless, furniture just unwrapped... At the end of the hallway, a door was swinging shut. Someone had just walked through ahead of him. Hermann. Who else?

Sitting slumped in his armchair, Newt could not hear Hermann at all. He couldn’t hear him moving or even breathing.

He imagined that he was sitting just in front of him, listening silently.

Newt spoke softly. “I know this isn’t the right time,” he said. “I know a lot of things are more important right now. But...”

His voice came out less hoarse than he expected. Clear. But quiet. He went on.

“I had a lot of time to think, on my break.”

He didn’t speak for a moment.

“When you disappeared, I wasn’t sure. And when you came back, I really wasn’t. I was torturing myself with regret and guilt and thinking, I don’t know, that it was all in my head... or that it was too late. Over before it began. Something like that. But I had a lot of time to think, on my break,” he said again. “This isn’t some want-it-cause-you-can’t-have-it thing. This is real. It’s the real deal.

“And I know—it’s complicated. You’re technically married? To someone who seems to be a fugitive? And I don’t know how you feel about all that, especially being here, again. I’m too afraid to ask you. Maybe you don’t know how you feel about it, either; maybe you’re waiting to figure it out.

“But I know how you feel about me. People say, people who have been—been together for a long time. For years and years. They say when it is they know... Well I know. It’s you and me.

“So maybe you won’t say anything—not now. I won’t push it either. Not anymore. I decided. I’m
just waiting. Waiting for you.”

Newt kept his eyes closed. He felt like he had untethered himself from shore and was drifting away. Freedom in the free-fall. The AC became the wind and Hermann’s distant breathing became the waves, and he drifted down into sleep. And Hermann lay awake in the bed, his back to Newt, his eyes wide open, for a long time after.

In the morning, Hermann woke first. Newton was still sound asleep, snoring lightly in his chair with his jacket over him as a blanket. Hermann brushed his teeth, dressed, made coffee for Newton on the room’s tiny machine, adjusted his jacket over him, hesitated there a moment; then he went downstairs to wait.

SPONSOR BREAK #1

NEWT (VO): You would think, after everything that happened in Quebec City, well... Something. But when we got back home to Massachusetts, all the mysteries I’d left behind were still waiting. Inert.

We still didn’t know much about Rothco. We still didn’t know where Vanessa was. We had leads on the Alex Calder case, but we still hadn’t questioned Dr. G about it. And I felt that time was coming soon.

We also hadn’t heard from Raleigh, our European correspondent, in almost two months. His family has contacted the French authorities, but so far, there’s nothing. We’re doing everything we can to locate him.

(interlude music #5)

So where were we?

The recovery of the painting felt like a major breakthrough at first brush. (Pun intended.) However, it wasn’t authenticated yet. The process was proving much longer, for reasons the museum admin was being taciturn about.

In journalism, you should not go in expecting big breaks like this—but everyone does. I don’t think it’s just me. The sad truth of it is this: a big break—even a long-awaited casebreaker like a stolen painting or a message from the missing—opens more questions than it closes.

Who left us that painting? How did they get it?

Did they give it to us out of the goodness of their heart, or to some other end? What end?

Was it Vanessa? Where was she, and why was she hiding? Was she working with us, or against us?

So we had to wait. It was all we could do.

I handled the agonizing monotony of patience for about six minutes before I tossed our secondary mysteries aside and started trawling alternative sources for answers about the painting. All I had was the pictures I had taken with my phone. Photos of the front and the back of the painting, and one close-up of the code page.
The numbers on the back were a good place to start. I, amateur cryptographer extraordinaire, identified it as a book code. Dr. G said he thought he knew what book Vanessa would have chosen: *The Crying of Lot 49* by Thomas Pynchon. Now we had to find the right edition.

The code page on the painting itself presented another tricky problem.

MAKO: So Newt. We’re looking at the picture you took of the painting you and Dr. G recovered in Quebec. In the recording from when you discover it, you read something off of it. A few lines and a number.

NEWT: Yeah. It’s weird, cause in this picture...

MAKO: …Yeah. In this picture, there’s nothing. Just the usual code.

NEWT: *(uncomfortable)* Yeah.

MAKO: Did you see something? Something different than what this picture shows?

NEWT: *(uncertain)* I don’t think so... I mean, I was a little hyped up on adrenaline.

MAKO: Enough to hallucinate?

NEWT: Enough for my mind to form patterns that aren’t there, maybe?

MAKO: Okay, Dr. Gottlieb. *(Newt laughs)* Well, I’m looking into the lines you read. I haven’t found any hits yet. The language was pretty vague. So maybe it was just synapses misfiring.

*(interlude music #5)*

I wanted very much to show the pictures of the painting to an expert. But Dr. Wagner, our rare books expert, was not available. I tried Dr. Byrne up in Canada too. She couldn’t be reached.

On a whim, I turned to another earlier source.

DR. MILTON RESNICK: *(English, cheerfully brisk)* Mr. Geiszler. So excellent to hear from you again.

NEWT: And you, Dr. Resnick! Thanks so much for giving us your time. Again.

RESNICK: Of course, that's quite alright. I was very glad to hear from you again, actually.

NEWT: Yeah?

RESNICK: Yes. After we spoke, I had an attack of vanity and listened to our interview on your show. Then I got intrigued, and listened to the rest of the episodes. Fascinating stuff.

NEWT: *(chuffed)* Aw. Thanks.

RESNICK: A little sensational for my academic side. But just juicy.

NEWT: Hm, well—

RESNICK: So I’ve been listening since. But I absolutely *kicked* myself when I heard your last episode. Your books expert was talking about the Pilori and the herald mythos.
NEWT: That’s right. Do you know anything about those?

RESNICK: As it happens, I know a similar story, from a different place. I’m not as familiar with the Pilori, who are, I believe she said, fae folk? Yes, well—the story I’m familiar with is of a real group. Not fae, but a cult. They were called the Cult of la Torre di Tierra. They were pagans in Northern Italy, and they had a similar belief about the power of the spoken word. Their beliefs and practices centered around invocations that only a chosen few could read or speak.

NEWT: That sounds interesting.

RESNICK: Yes. The reason I know about them is because of their influence on a rather radical monk working in their area in the 16th century. And this was why I was kicking myself, because I wished I had told you this story when we first spoke!

NEWT: What’s the story?

RESNICK: The Cult of la Torre di Tierra, despite their paganism, was a major influence on a certain apocryphal scholar named Stefano de Ercole. He was a monk at the Monasterio Santa Maria Alborense, and it’s through his writing that we primarily know of the Ceonophus.

NEWT: (realizing) ...Oh!

RESNICK: Yes! He spent his life studying the writings of Adémar de Chabannes.

NEWT: Wow!

RESNICK: As you remember, no modern scholar has ever seen or studied the Ceonophus. We only know of it secondhand, through citations from scholars of the middle ages. Stefano is our primary source for these accounts. It is Stefano who gives us the concept of the Ceonophus as the sort of “apocalypse manual” we now consider it. He spent his life studying this book, supposedly.

There are a few reasons historians consider him—Stefano, and the Ceonophus by extension—apocryphal. There is no evidence the book exists, because he never quotes it directly. Stefano is happy to summarize passages for us, but he makes no citations. He does not refer to where the book is stored, and no one else seems to have ever laid eyes on it. It’s entirely possible he made it all up.

NEWT: (excited) Okay—yes. Sure. Could be. But assuming, pretending he didn’t, for a minute. What did he say about the book?

RESNICK: In short, Stefano believed that the words had been written by Adémar, the messenger, but that they could only be truly understood by a figure he called “the herald.” The herald would come after Adémar, to make his written word into spoken truth. Your scholar Dr. Wagner used this same term, and it’s what flipped the switch in my mind. Stefano believed himself to be that very herald.

This is where the influence of the Torre di Tierra cult comes in. His herald idea was similar to theirs, or the Pilori’s, “powerful words” theory, but more specific: specific to one person. The incantations in the Ceonophus were not a normal spells—they were not arbitrary signifiers to be spoken by anyone, not traversable passageways, like your demon board. The words would mean nothing in the mouths of others. Only the herald could speak them truly.

NEWT: And Stefano believed he was that herald?

RESNICK: It seems he did.
NEWT: This is fascinating.

RESNICK: Unfortunately for Stefano, the role of apocalyptic messenger did not come with job security. He was excommunicated in 1610. The recorded reason is “Heresy,” which could mean a number of things.

NEWT: 1610? When did Stefano live?

RESNICK: He lived from 1543 to 1629.

NEWT: And where? In Italy?


NEWT: (surprised) But that’s...

RESNICK: Yes.

NEWT: Porto Ercole is where Caravaggio died.

RESNICK: Yes.

NEWT: In 1610.

RESNICK: Yes.

NEWT: Whoa.

RESNICK: Stefano’s monastery was a two days journey away. The Cult of la Torre di Tierra was in Porto Ercole. You can still visit the Torre today. It’s still there. It’s the oldest structure in the town.

NEWT: Dr. Resnick, you found it—you found a possible connection! Do you know how long I’ve been looking? I don’t know if I want to kill you or kiss you!

RESNICK: (laughing) Well, how about neither?

NEWT: (hurried) Wow. This is great. Okay. I’ve got about 6,000 ideas pulling my brain in 6,000 directions right now, so bear with me, Doc. What are the chances Stefano ran from the monastery and joined the cult?

RESNICK: I’ve no idea. We have nothing on him after his excommunication except a death record. No writings whatsoever.

NEWT: Is it possible he took his radical ideas to them, after the Church rejected them?

RESNICK: I suppose anything is possible.

NEWT (VO): Was this, at last, the concrete connection between the Ceonophus and the Capovolto Code that I had been searching for? Was it a stretch? Did I have any business searching for such a connection in the first place?

What if Caravaggio, working in that area at that time, had come into contact with Stefano the herald? Was it possible he had copied a page out of the Ceonophus for his painting? What if that had angered Stefano, or the cult? Would we ever find out?

Whether it was true or not, this must have been the connection Tomás Hawking made.
Was that why he went to Porto Ercole and started following the trail of Adémar the monk?

And where was he now?

And where was Raleigh?

NEWT (VO): When we come back, we set ancient history aside in favor of recent history. It’s time to dive back into the mystery of Alex Calder.

SPONSOR BREAK #2

NEWT (VO): Last episode, we made a major discovery: young Dr. Gottlieb was the one who found the body of the missing Alex Calder. According to one witness, he seemed to do so on instinct.

This goes against pretty much every single thing Hermann Gottlieb spent his life writing, stating, asserting, disputing, and controverting. As such, I had yet to ask him about it. I had decided to interview one last witness before I spoke to him directly—before Dr. G could bias or distort my perspective on the story.

JACKSON: *(voice personable but airy)* Oh, yeah. It must be twenty years since I saw him. Maybe longer.

NEWT (VO): That’s the voice of Jackson Styll—older brother of Clifford, whom we spoke with last episode, and childhood best friend, apparently, of Hermann Gottlieb. He’s now a software engineer living in South Carolina.

NEWT: So you and Dr... You and Hermann grew up together?

JACKSON: Yeah, Hermie and I became friends in preschool. I don’t ever remember not knowing him. We must have been 2 or 3... Well, I do know that it was soon after he moved over from Germany, cause he didn’t know any English yet. *(wryly)* Instead, he expressed himself by biting. Didn’t bother three-year-old me, I guess. We were friends from then on.

When we got to first grade, he started going away for school. But he came back every summer, and we would spent the whole vacation together. We just picked up where we left off. It was like he never left.

NEWT: How exactly would you describe your friend Hermann?

JACKSON: I don’t really know... It’s been such a long time since we saw each other.

NEWT: Did you have a falling out?

JACKSON: No, no, nothing like that... I don’t know. Sometime around... college, I guess, we fell out of touch. People change so much. You know?

NEWT: Yeah. Of course.

JACKSON: I mean, I’d love to see him again. I reached out after Mrs. G died, but I never heard back. I just figured he and Karla were going through it, and then, well...

NEWT: Right. *(pause)* So, August 1984. Can you tell us what you remember about Alex Calder’s disappearance?
JACKSON: Of course. I remember it really well. Me and my hometown friends had just started at Lincoln-Sudbury High, it was the summer after freshman year. I was dragging Hermie around with the Lincoln-Sudbury guys. He was a good sport about it.

I remember the day it happened. Mom wasn’t around, and Cliff had been nagging me, so I was spending the day over at Ritchie’s.

NEWT: Not at um, at Hermann’s?

JACKSON: No, no. We never went over his house.

NEWT: No?

JACKSON: No. Once we were old enough to choose where we hung out, he never invited me over. I got the feeling it was for a reason... Like that he didn't want his parents to meet me.

NEWT: Huh.

JACKSON: So on this day, Hermann was with us. He didn’t know Ritchie or the other guys too well, and he was always a bit shy, but I could usually talk him into coming. They all thought he was a little weird. Which, like, he was. But in the end, wherever I was going, he was going too.

Well, Alex was the only thing on the news that week. Hermann and I had talked about it a few times. He seemed worried about it, but he didn’t seem to know how to say why. I couldn’t get it out of him, so I didn’t push it. But the guys got to talking about it. We talked about what might have happened—like, was there a killer or a kidnapper loose in town? Or had he just gotten lost?

But Hermie got real quiet, all the sudden. He was in the middle of a sentence, I forget what he was saying, but he suddenly got this look on his face. Like he’d seen something out the window. I turned to look. Nothing there. I asked him what was wrong. He said he didn’t know, then got up and walked out.

I went out after him. He was standing on the front steps, by the bikes, looking down the street. I asked him if he was okay. I wasn’t sure if maybe his leg was acting up, or if it was Alex. Sensitive guy, you know. He said he wasn’t sure. I don’t remember, exactly, how the conversation went, but he—I forget what I asked, but he said—“I know where he is.”

That was when things started to get... weird.

NEWT: *(hushed)* What did you think... when he said that? What went through your mind?

JACKSON: I didn’t know what to think at all. But I didn’t get scared. Like that he knew... *(darkly)* something. I didn’t get like... suspicious.

NEWT: You didn’t?

JACKSON: No. I trusted him.

NEWT: Okay. (...) Did he say anything else? Or did he start leading you guys to the body at that point?

JACKSON: No... yes. He said one more thing before we left. He said he’d had a dream. The night before. About Alex. He said... Yes. He said he had a dream last night, and it was so vivid and real while he was dreaming it, that when he woke up, he felt like he was in the dream world. That the dream had been the real thing, and that he was still asleep. Even now. On the porch. *That* stuck with
NEWT: Yeah... I bet.

JACKSON: Yeah. God. It’s been years since I thought about all this.

(beat)

JACKSON: Well he said, in the dream, he saw a pond in a clearing.

NEWT: What did that have to do with Alex Calder?

JACKSON: Hermie said that Alex was there. Alex was standing next to the pond, wearing a red sweater, pointing at the ground.

NEWT: Okay. And Herm...ann, he knew where that pond was? That specific pond? There must be loads of ponds around Lincoln. I mean, Walden is right there. How did Hermann know it was this one? Your brother Clifford said he had never been there before. He said it wasn’t even a pond. It was a...

JACKSON: A vernal pool. Yeah. No, but Hermann was real specific about it. It was a little pond, with trees growing out of it, on a hill. He and I, we grew up riding and exploring all over town. We knew those woods. He said he knew how to get there.

NEWT: But it just seems impossible. I mean. If you’ll excuse my skepticism.

JACKSON: Believe me. I know how it sounds.

NEWT: I know you said you didn’t feel suspicious, but... Did the thought even cross your mind? That the reason Hermann knew was because he had something to do with the boy’s disappearance? Or that he knew whoever did?

JACKSON: Honestly... it would have crossed my mind with anyone else. If anyone else had told me they had a prophetic dream about Alex’s disappearance, I would have been completely skeptical. Or suspicious. But Hermie wouldn’t lie. He wasn’t a chatty kid, but he was never a liar. He would never have... lied to me or misled me. He was loyal. Devoted. To a fault.

NEWT: How do you mean?

JACKSON: Like, oh... Like this. One time, when we were probably ten or eleven, we found this rotten canoe in the woods. Not at all seaworthy, but we took it downstream anyway. We're having a great time, getting soaked, and then the river takes a turn and there's rapids ahead. Hermie starts steering us towards shore. He manages to scramble out, somehow, and he's holding onto the canoe so I can get out.

I start to stand up, when boom, this huge hunk of wood comes in the current and smacks the side of the canoe. I tip over and fall back into the canoe, and Hermie loses his grip.

I get swept away towards the rapids. And I’m trying to get back up, paddle, jump out or something, and I can hear Hermie yelling my name, trying to grab on, and I’m getting swept away, and then —boom again! He’d caught the canoe but he couldn’t stop it. So he had jumped back in. I don’t even know how he kept pace with his leg, but he did it. Even though he was safe, he got back in, so that I wouldn’t get swept away alone.

NEWT: Wow.
JACKSON: And the rapids were no joke. We tried to steer, then just to hold on, but we finally hit a big rock and the canoe just split open. We made it to shore—we were lucky. I had to help Hermie out, cause he’s not the greatest swimmer. And when we got to shore, I asked him why he got back in. He just looked at me like I was crazy. Of course he got back in. Of course he wouldn’t let me go alone.

(beat)

JACKSON: Hello? Mr. Geiszler?

NEWT: Yeah. Hi. Sorry. I’m just... having a hard time putting it all together.

JACKSON: (distant) I haven’t seen him in such a long time. But that was the kind of person Hermie was.

NEWT: Ride or die?

JACKSON: Ride or die. (laughs, but sadly) Exactly. And he still is, I’m sure. (...) Last I heard, he’d settled down with a girl and was getting his PhD. His mom died around then, I think. That was the last time I reached out. I never heard from him.

NEWT: I’m sorry.

JACKSON: It’s okay... It happens.

NEWT: How do you think he knew where Alex’s body was?

JACKSON: The dream.

NEWT: You believe that?

JACKSON: I do.

(interlude music #3)

NEWT (VO): It was strange to hear younger Hermann described in this way. A sensitive, quiet kid, the kind of kid who would follow you down a waterfall just to make sure you don’t get hurt. I guess, once I thought about it, he really wasn’t that different now. He’ll plant his flag on his hill and die for the things he believes in, no matter how unimportant or absurd others might think they are.

The thing I still couldn’t reconcile was the dream. Young Dr. Gottlieb the psychic. What did it mean?

By now, I had exhausted my alternate avenues. I knew he was going to be upset, but I couldn’t avoid the conversation any longer.

(interlude music #5)

NEWT (VO): A week had gone by since the Quebec City escapades. The museum was still keeping the authentication process under wraps, and our work on the book code on the back was nearly done.

NEWT: So, two things. First thing: I talked to your friend at Oxford again.

HERMANN: Dr. Resnick?
NEWT: Man, sometimes, on this show, it feels like everyone has a doctorate except me. You know?

HERMANN: Well. You don’t.

NEWT: No need to rub it in. Dr. Resnick had an interesting tale to tell about an Italian monk named Stefano.

HERMANN: I don’t think I’m familiar with that particular monk.

NEWT (VO): I played Dr. G the interview. He seemed intrigued, but not quite as excited as I was.

HERMANN: As always, Newton, I feel you are seeing connections where they don’t exist.

NEWT: So you’ve never heard of this story before? Nothing about the Ceonophus?

HERMANN: As I said, I know very little of the Ceonophus myth.

NEWT: I’m sensing a “but”...?

HERMANN: ...But...

NEWT: Yeah?

HERMANN: Yes. I’ve never heard it in this form, but it reminds me of a story my father used to tell, actually.

NEWT: (surprised) Really?

HERMANN: Yes. He was not exactly the storybook-at-bedtime parent, but there were a few stories of his that I liked. He had one about a herald. I forget the specifics.

NEWT: Completely?

HERMANN: Mostly. It stood out because at that age I thought “herald” was meant “newspaper,” as in The Boston Herald. (Newt laughs.) I think he came in a boat... Perhaps someone had built the boat for him. The story may have been about the boat builder, actually. I can’t really recall.

(interlude music #6)

NEWT: So, that’s the first thing.

HERMANN: Alright.

NEWT: The second thing is... Well.

HERMANN: Is something wrong?

NEWT: No. Yes. Well. You’re not going to like it.

HERMANN: No?

NEWT: No... You remember when we spoke to your sister? Earlier this year?

HERMANN: Yes.

NEWT: She told us to look for the boy in the pool. You said you didn’t know anything about that.
HERMANN: I remember.

NEWT: Well, we found him. Alex Calder.

HERMANN: (quiet inhale)

NEWT: ...Does that ring a bell?

(beat)

HERMANN: (low) How much do you know?

NEWT: I know you found his body.

HERMANN: How?

NEWT: How did you do it? I think that’s supposed to be my question—

HERMANN: No—how? How did you find out? Who did you talk to?

NEWT: I spoke to Clifford Styll. He was the one who told the police. But he told me you... that you found him.

HERMANN: (distant) I... Yes. Clifford was with us. As I recall.

NEWT: So you do remember.

HERMANN: Yes. Yes, of course I remember.

NEWT: But that’s not the whole story. Right?

HERMANN: (...) What are you asking?

NEWT: Clifford said you led the group. So did his brother. His brother said it was you.

HERMANN: (faintly) His brother.

NEWT: Yeah, he said you led the way. That you had a dream. About Alex.

HERMANN: (quiet) You spoke to Jacks.

NEWT: I’m... sorry. I can see you’re upset. That must have been a traumatizing experience.

HERMANN: (voice coming back to normal) It wasn’t pretty.

NEWT: Could you... tell us about it?

HERMANN: There’s nothing to tell.

NEWT: What?

HERMANN: There’s nothing I could add to Jackson’s account. I’m sure it was perfectly thorough.

NEWT: I could play you his interview...

HERMANN: Please don’t.
NEWT: Okay... (pause) Did you really have a prophetic dream?

HERMANN: There are no such things as prophetic dreams, Newton.

NEWT: ...So you’re not going to tell me?

HERMANN: There’s nothing to tell.

NEWT: (...) (evenly) Okay.

(beat)

HERMANN: ...Is that all? You’re not going to keep pushing?

NEWT: Do you want me to?

HERMANN: It isn’t my radio program.

NEWT: (amused) Podcast, dude. But no. I’m not. If you say that’s it, then, that’s it.

HERMANN: Oh. (...) Alright.

NEWT: Yeah. And if you change your mind, you’ve got my number.

   (interlude music #1)

   (music fades out)

   NEWT (VO): A few days later, we found the right edition of *The Crying of Lot 49*. The message on the back of the painting was instructions and a date. I won’t say the exact date on air, but it’s in November. Next month. It asks the recipient—Hermann, or me, or both?—to meet the writer on Rainsford Island, a.k.a. Quarantine Island.

   I called Hermann with the news.

HERMANN: (through phone) Are you going to go?

NEWT: Me? What do you think? Of course I’ll go.

HERMANN: You still expect answers, don’t you? After all this time?

NEWT: Well...

HERMANN: I’ve been looking for almost twenty years, Newton. I’ve been waiting for answers about Vanessa for eleven. You’ve been on this for less than two.

NEWT: And?

HERMANN: I’ve learned not to expect a resolution.

NEWT: Well, two years is nothing to sneeze at. But I don't know. Maybe I’ve learned that too. Maybe I’m not expecting anything concrete, but going anyway. Call me an optimist.

HERMANN: You’re an optimist.

NEWT: (audibly smiling) You’re damn right.
HERMANN: *(slight laugh)*

NEWT: And you? Are you going?

HERMANN: Am I—what?

NEWT: To the island. Are you coming?

HERMANN: Newton, you really ask the most foolish questions. Of course I am.

*(outro music begins)*

NEWT (VO): Next month, our season finale. Depending on network decisions, our series finale. We’ll be seeing what’s on Quarantine Island, if anything, and spin our threads closed however we can.

*(outro music ends)*

NEWT (VO): See you then.
This Herald Sayeth

Chapter Notes

Thank you everyone for your patience, kind comments, and for sticking with it all this way. I am so thankful for fanfic as a cultural space to just go wild and experiment and learn about all the trials & tribulations of plotting/worldbuilding/editing/audience relations. I love it, I will never not be grateful to it. This is the longest story I've written in my life (so far!), and it's been really great to do it with your support.

I hope you enjoy the finale.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

From: “[redacted]” <[redacted]>
To: “[redacted]” <[redacted]>
CC: “HR” <[redacted]>, “[redacted]” <[redacted]>
Sent: Monday, November 11, 2013, 5:36:47 PM EST
Subject: FW: Black Tapes 207 Final Edits

Message:

Review attached file for QA, content. Publication approval pending contract termination negotiation following producer resignation.

* **Internal: SENSITIVE. DO NOT SHARE.***

Copied to HR. Copied to legal.

<begin forwarded message>

From: “Newton Geiszler” ngeiszler@wgbh.org
To: “[redacted]” <[redacted]>
Sent: Monday, November 11, 2013, 3:52:01 PM EST
Subject: "Black Tapes 207 Final Edits"

Attached: BTP207-edited.mp3 (60.6 MB)

SEASON 2, EPISODE 7: THIS HERALD SAYETH

[PUBLICATION PENDING]

(Fade in... exterior sounds, wind)
(As audio gets louder, sound resolves to waves and wind. A boat on the ocean. Wind is howling, motor is straining, waves are hitting side of the speeding boat.)

(Motor whines)

(Wind and waves continue)

NEWT: (calling over wind) Is that it, up ahead?

VOICE: (muffled from inside ship cabin) That’s it!

(motor whine pitches down as boat slows; waves slapping get louder)

NEWT: (quieter) Hermann, do you see that?

HERMANN: Yes...

NEWT: Is it smoke...?

CAPTAIN: (loud, muffled from inside) I’m going to dock same as last time. Sound good?

NEWT: (calling back) All good! (lower) Hermann, what is that...

HERMANN: I don’t know. I don’t like it.

(motor continues slowing down)

NEWT: If—

(resounding THUMP)

NEWT: Whoa!

(stumbling footsteps, objects crashing to floor)

HERMANN: (indistinct)

(Ship captain yells indistinctly)

NEWT: [expletive bleeped]! What the hell was that?

(voices nearby)

(slapping waves continue)

NEWT: Did we hit something? I can’t see anything—it’s too dark.

HERMANN: I think something hit us.

(yelling getting closer—coming from inside the cabin)

HERMANN: (low) They’re getting closer.

NEWT: (hissing) Should we be quiet?

HERMANN: I think they’re looking for us.
VOICE FROM INSIDE CABIN: (muffled) ...It’s non-negotiable. We will not use force unless we have to. But if we have to, we will.

HERMANN: (sharp inhale)

NEWT: Hermann?

(doors crash open)

NEWT: (hisses) Ow!

FEMALE VOICE: You. Both of you. Come with me.

NEWT: Uh... I don’t think so. I don’t really make a habit of doing what balaclava-clad pirates tell me to do.

WOMAN: Non-negotiable. You’re not going onto that island. You’re coming with us.

NEWT: (provocative) Are you, like, threatening me?

HERMANN: (voice thin, strained) Newton, we’re going with her.

NEWT: (angrily) Oh, are we, Dr. Gottlieb?

WOMAN: Like I said. Not negotiable.

NEWT: Hermann, would you mind explaining what the hell is going on? And while we’re at it, releasing your death grip on my arm?

HERMANN: (...) (strained) Newton Geiszler, I’d like to introduce you... to Vanessa Gottlieb.

(theme music fades in)

(theme music plays: acoustic guitar, church bells, a faraway female voice... full song plays.)

NEWT (VOICEOVER): Welcome to the finale of the Black Tapes Podcast.

(music fades out)

NEWT (VO): On the night of Thursday, November 7th, Hermann and I chartered our old friend The Lady of Shalott for our second trip, and headed out at the date and time we found on the back of the painting. Destination: Rainsford Island; also known as Quarantine Island, if you’ve got a flair for the dramatic.

It was a frosty November night. Visibility was dismally low—it was a new moon, and the sky was absolutely shrouded black with clouds. We pulled out into the frigid harbor, leaving the orange glow of Boston behind.

(interlude music #5)

NEWT (VO): This will be the last episode of the Black Tapes Podcast. There are a few reasons why, and I’ll do my best to explain them here.

The primary reason is legal. A number of questions connected to the podcast have now become open criminal investigations. And well, it turns out there is a limit to the number
of criminal investigations in which a publicly-funded podcast can involve itself before said podcast loses said funding.

But there’s also a limit to what a podcast or short-format radio documentary can elucidate. At a certain point, the questions we ask become too far-reaching to narrativize. It becomes reductive of reality and condescending to the listener to try. To a certain extent, we’ll be able to wrap up some of the narrative threads we started with so long ago; but for the most part, we’re going to leave this the same way that you will—confused and wondering.

I don’t really know what else to say. I have explanation, but not much consolation. I... don’t think I need to tell you how disappointed I am, dear listener. I know you—you get me.

This episode will cover the final twenty-four hours of our work.

*(interlude music #6)*

*(exterior ocean sounds)*

NEWT (VO): As we approached the island, our captain slowed down to dock. That was when we saw the column of smoke rising from the island. It looked like it was coming from the area where the hospital had been, but before we could get a good look—*boom*.

Another boat, small and sleek, had snuck up from around the island. They tied to our side quickly, and before we or the captain had time to react, they boarded us.

There were three of them: two men and one woman. They were dressed for a diamond heist in a high-security vault with a lot of lasers.

So, after some light piracy, I found myself face-to-face, at last, with the elusive Ms. Vanessa Gottlieb.

Hermann and I got into the other boat, and they whisked us away.

*(interior boat sounds: now we are inside a cabin. Wind and waves and motor are audible outside, but muffled. The motor whine on this boat is higher. It’s driving away fast.)*

NEWT: What was going on on the island? What was that fire?

VANESSA: I don’t know.

NEWT: Where are you taking us?

VANESSA: Somewhere safe.

NEWT: What was the danger on the island?

VANESSA: It was a trap.

NEWT: Set by whom?

VANESSA: I’m not answering any more questions.

NEWT: What was the fire?
VANESSA: Cookout.

NEWT: (...)

NEWT: But who would set a trap for us? Who? What could anyone possibly want from us? Information? Don’t they know they could just call?

VANESSA: (snapping) What did I just say?

NEWT: (impudently) I can’t seem to recall.

VANESSA: I said I’m not answering any more [expletive bleeped] questions on tape.

NEWT: But how did you know we would be—

HERMANN: Newton.

NEWT: (...)

(pause) (engine and ocean sounds continue)

NEWT: (subdued) Sorry. I’ll... let you two talk.

VANESSA: We’ll talk on the mainland. I need to focus right now.

NEWT: On?

VANESSA: Getting us out of here.

NEWT (VO): I—like you, perhaps, dear listener—had been picturing this person for almost two years. It was so, so strange to finally meet her in person. She was so different. I felt like the imaginary Vanessa in my mind was still somewhere out there—lost, alone—and this person, driving the boat, was someone else entirely. A Vanessa who had just stepped in from an alternate reality.

She was intense. I had not pictured her so intense.

I guess I hadn’t pictured Hermann with someone so intense. Maybe because he is himself. But maybe he took some of that on himself after she left—some aspect of her.

The Hermann I knew was the Hermann I saw as the original, default version—but that was the Hermann who had lost his wife. That was the Hermann who had lived eleven long years wondering what had happened to her. It occurred to me, somehow for the first time, that the Hermann before she disappeared was probably different from the one I knew now. It had probably changed him in ways I would never understand.

And almost certainly, she was different now too.

Did they recognize each other?

I was also struck by the fact that they had not touched, and hardly addressed each other directly. Hermann had hardly said a word. I mean, it had been eleven years. Something was going on. Something I didn’t understand.

Whether there was some particular piece of information I didn’t know, or whether it was just a situation I could never comprehend from the outside, I wasn’t sure.
(interlude music #3)

___________________ OFF THE RECORD __________________

(wind, waves, but no motor)

(one seagull cries in the distance)

(footsteps on wooden dock, boards creaking)

NEWT: Hey. I’m sorry. For before.

HERMANN: Sorry?

NEWT: For grilling her. I shouldn’t have pushed.

HERMANN: It’s alright.

NEWT: No, I could see it upset you. (...) I’m sorry.

HERMANN: (...) It’s alright.

NEWT: Okay.

(beat)

NEWT: Talk to me, man. Do you know what’s going on?

HERMANN: No.

VANESSA: (in the distance) Let’s go!

___________________ RESUME RECORD __________________

NEWT (VO): They took us back to the mainland. It was a different dock than we’d left from—I didn’t recognize it. They shepherded us onto shore, off the dock, and into a van.

Now, even as an investigative reporter with an impulse problem, I don’t make a habit of getting into vans with strangers. This whole thing was more suspicious than a ten-foot-tall person in a trench coat requesting an R-rated movie ticket in a high squeaky voice. But Hermann was going with it, and after everything, well, I guess I trusted him. In this instance, it seemed, even more than my own instincts.

We drove for a while. They finally stopped us in front of a powder blue two-family house on a hill, with white shutters and porches. I had no idea where we were. I think it was a safehouse.

Vanessa and Hermann went into a separate room to talk, and shut the door. I hovered in the kitchen. Her two associates—who would not give me their names or consent to be recorded—waited outside on the front porch. I believe they were keeping watch.

After about half an hour, Vanessa and Hermann came back out. I asked her if now would be a good time to conduct our interview. She glanced at Hermann, then looked back at me and gave me a sad smile. When she smiled, her face transformed—into someone kinder, someone older. Someone real.
She didn’t say anything else. She just looked at Hermann one more time, and walked out. I heard her go down the porch steps, and then I heard the van start.

Hermann followed, but slowly. Not like he was moving to catch up. He walked out the front door and stood on the porch. I stayed in the kitchen.

Through the front window, I could see his back as he looked down at the street below. I heard the van rev and then drive away. He stood there for a long moment, leaning on the white railing. Nothing but a silhouette. Even just in shadow, I could see the weight on his shoulders. He leaned on the rail so heavily I was afraid he’d fall right off into the night.

I stayed waiting in the kitchen.

After a few minutes, he came back in.

(sound of door closing)

(footsteps with cane)

(someone sitting down)

(pause)

(faucet turns on)

(water filling a glass)

(faucet turns off)

(footsteps)

(glass being placed gently on wooden table)

HERMANN: (softly) Thank you.

NEWT: (quiet) Mhm.

NEWT (VO): We sat in the kitchen in silence for a long while. Finally, Hermann spoke.

HERMANN: Thank you. For... waiting. With me.

NEWT: Yeah. Of course.

HERMANN: And for...

NEWT: ...Oh. No, yeah (...) I get it. Don’t worry.

HERMANN: I’m still... processing.

NEWT: Yeah. Of course. Don’t worry.

(beat)

NEWT: Maybe you’ll see each other again. One day. Maybe?

HERMANN: I don’t think so.
(pause)

NEWT: (quiet) I’m sorry.

HERMANN: It’s alright. (...) I never thought I’d see her again to begin with.

NEWT: (…)

HERMANN: (with difficulty) At least… At least this way I got to say goodbye.

NEWT: Yeah.

(long pause)

HERMANN: Let’s go.

NEWT: Go?

HERMANN: Yes. Out of this house.

(stands up)

NEWT: Where—?

HERMANN: Anywhere. It doesn’t matter.

NEWT (VO): So we went.

One of our courteous kidnappers had driven Dr. G’s car from the harbor to the safehouse. We drove for a long time, mostly in silence. I didn’t ask any questions; but he didn’t ask me to leave or offer to take me home.

Hermann drove. The whole way, he was silent and still. Wishing to respect his conversational and emotional privacy, Newt tried to keep silent too. The late unlit streets of the sub-freezing Greater Boston Area were hollowed out by the cold and the hour. No one else was on the road. And in the pressure of the cold silence surrounding them, Hermann seemed completely still.

Newt watched him from the passenger seat. He did not know where they were going, if anywhere, nor when they would get there, if ever. Newt thought, as he often did when going from one place to another, of Zeno’s paradox. If you crossed every distance by half-intervals, could you ever reach your destination? Half-distance after half-distance was closed, each one smaller, until you were infinitesimally close, but never arrived. Maybe that was what they were doing. Closing endless half-intervals to nowhere.

“You don’t have to be quiet for my sake.”

Newt didn’t even see his mouth move, in the dark. If he hadn’t heard him, he wouldn’t have believed he’d spoken at all.

“Sorry?” he said.

Another car passed in the opposite direction, sending a lance of icy light over Hermann’s motionless profile.

“I’m just thinking,” Hermann said, tone neutral. “I don’t need silence for that.”

He turned on the radio. He was feeling very uncertain about the boundaries of privacy and care, particularly with his recorder going in his pocket.

“I was trying to give you some personal time,” Newt said, as the anesthetic tones of Rivers Cuomo filled the car. “To process.”

“I am processing,” Hermann said.

Even when he spoke, he seemed motionless. Newt was in awe, suddenly, of his colleague’s steadiness. He was like a glacier. Newt had never known someone so constant. Maybe that was another word for stubbornness, he thought, but that did nothing to stem his sudden flow of affection. There he sat, perfectly still, thinking over whole scores of things in tamped-down silence; thinking a rate that appeared incremental from the ground, but was, in reality, carving a whole landscape.

“Where are we going?” Newt asked at last.

“Nowhere, yet,”

“...But?”

“...But, we’ll go somewhere, when I’m done.”

“Done thinking?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

“Soon,” Hermann added after a pause.

Newt found that his heart was beating hard.

“Take your time,” he said.

———

NEWT (VO): After a while, he turned north and took us back to the Lincoln house.

The sky was darker than ever when we got out. Every window of the house was dark. I could see frost on the grass even though there was no moonlight—it gave the whole field a weird blue glow. Hermann turned the front porch light on and let us in.

NEWT: So, I know it’s late, but... if you’re up for it?

HERMANN: Yes.

NEWT: We don’t have to. We can wait. Or (...) Or we can leave it.

HERMANN: No. It’s alright. I’m ready. Can I get you a drink first?

NEWT: Sure. Whatever you’re having.

NEWT (VO): We sat in the living room. The first time I was here, this room was only boxes. We sat on crates. Now, there was a couch, armchairs, a coffee table, crowded bookshelves, even a record player. I sat on one of the armchairs and Hermann sat on the
HERMANN: She was a watcher.

NEWT: Vanessa?

HERMANN: Yes. That’s what she told me.

NEWT: Did she leave us the painting, with the message?

HERMANN: No. Her original message, the one she sent to you, was intercepted. She said she believes “they” are monitoring the podcast. The message on the painting was planted by them.

NEWT: A trap?

HERMANN: So she said.

NEWT: What does that mean, a “watcher”?

HERMANN: Her original assignment was to track my whereabouts, report on my activities, and keep me safe. She did this at the behest of a shadow organization led by the Advocate.

NEWT: Did she know who the Advocate was?

HERMANN: She said she never met them. Mark Roth was her highest contact.

NEWT: She didn't think it was him?

HERMANN: She said she didn’t.

NEWT: Sounds like you disagree.

HERMANN: I plan to keep looking into it.

NEWT: (hesitantly) So... if she was... assigned to you, then... your marriage. Was it...?

HERMANN: No.

NEWT: (quietly) No?

HERMANN: She told me... (pause) This is difficult to talk about.

NEWT: I know. I’m sorry. You don’t have to talk about your marriage. It’s okay.

HERMANN: She told me she cared about me, but not... in the conventional way socially dictated by a marriage. (...) Our relationship began as a job. Dating was the natural course. Then marriage.

She told me she never fell in love, but that she grew to care about my well-being. She felt protective of me, and uncertain about her original assignment. It was complicated. I never knew this, of course.
At a certain point she began to lie to her superiors, to protect me from both “sides.” Sometime before her disappearance, she realized they suspected her. So she disappeared.

She’s been on the run from her organization ever since. As far as I could gather, she now works for an opposing organization. She refused to go into specifics about that.

NEWT: What else did she say?

HERMANN: She warned me that the Advocate had been watching me for a long time. She said they were preparing something... big.

NEWT: Something big? What does that mean?

HERMANN: I don’t know. She doesn’t either. The whole thing, it's... something to do with my family.

NEWT: How?

HERMANN: Genetics. According to Vanessa, these people, for some insane reason, believe I am the heir of some genetic key that gives me some sort of “Gift of Sight.” (derisively) They believe this gift will assist in whatever nonsense they’re planning.

NEWT: I’m not sure I understand. What people? What sight?

HERMANN: Vanessa believes that the Advocate, working through Rothco, has been working with the Cult of Tiamat.

NEWT: (intrigued) Really?

HERMANN: Yes. In order to bring about some... some sort of something.

NEWT: (lightly teasing) Sounds like you’re avoiding a particular word...

HERMANN: (archly) Does it?

NEWT: (pause) (quietly serious) ...Like the Herald thing? The Pilori? That kind of sight?

HERMANN: Newton, those are nothing more than stories.

NEWT: (...)

HERMANN: (...)

NEWT: (realizing) Oh... Was that why Mark Roth stole your coffee cup? For the genetic material?

HERMANN: The possibility has occurred to me.

NEWT: So tell me... I couldn’t help but notice things were strange between you. Which, I know, is to be expected after eleven years. But I was wondering.

HERMANN: Yes?

NEWT: Was this really the first time you saw each other?

HERMANN: (...) I had been trying to get in touch with her for some time. Since last December.
NEWT: You told me you never found her.

HERMANN: I didn’t. But I did find some leads. Some leads which I kept to myself. I got one of them from your friend, Mr. Becket.

NEWT: Really?

HERMANN: *(grimly)* That was what you... overheard us discussing.

NEWT: *(surprised)* You were talking about Vanessa?

HERMANN: Yes.

NEWT: Why didn’t you tell me?

HERMANN: I didn’t want you to broadcast it. I didn’t want to scare her off by potentially exposing her. But then... Well, I reached out through the various back channels I discovered. And when she finally answered me, it was *through* the podcast. That surprised me. I was able to get in contact with her following our visit to Quebec last month. We exchanged several encrypted emails.

NEWT: But you were surprised to see her, tonight. Right?

HERMANN: Yes. Her language in those emails led me to believe she was deep in hiding. I didn’t expect to see her. Ever.

*(beat)*

NEWT: Can I ask you something?

HERMANN: I believe that’s how this works, yes.

NEWT: *(chuckles)* Uh—so I’ve been wondering. The Gottlieb Institute. Was there some other reason you founded it, besides the stated mission? I don’t mean an ulterior motive. But like, an underlying motive.

HERMANN: I remember you asking me the same thing on the day we met.

NEWT: *(audibly smiling)* You brushed me off that time too, as I recall.

HERMANN: *(not without warmth)* Well. No. The Institute’s mission is to debunk all claims of the paranormal. That is the primary reason for its existence.

NEWT: ...But?

HERMANN: But.

NEWT: You started the Institute soon after she disappeared, didn’t you?

HERMANN: Yes. (...) At a personal level, it’s possible I was motivated by other factors, in that period. Grief, some... personal failures.

NEWT: Like what?

HERMANN: When Vanessa disappeared... I went looking for her. You recall.

NEWT: For five days. You said you went out into the woods.
HERMANN: Yes. I did. I thought I had insights the police wouldn’t have. I knew her. (darkly) Or, I thought I did. Well, in any case, my insights were worthless. I found nothing. So I became desperate. I attempted to... rekindle the ability I believed I had possessed as a child.

NEWT: ...The ability that led you to the body of Alex Calder?

HERMANN: Yes.

NEWT: So you...

HERMANN: But it was absurd, of course. I’m not a psychic. I never was.

NEWT: Then how do you explain it? You led them right to Alex Calder’s body. How did you know it was there?

HERMANN: When Alex disappeared, the news upset my mother deeply. I didn’t understand why, fully, at the time. She was already having difficulties—our father was away, she was arguing with my sister. She was friends with Mrs. Calder, and maybe that contributed. The sense that something so horrible could happen to a family she knew. I don’t know. For some reason... she was distraught.

I wanted to help, somehow. Fifteen-year-old boys, they think they have all the answers, if only someone would just ask them. I was no different. I thought I could solve the case through reasoning. And I knew those woods better than any police officer. So I pored over maps of Lincoln and the surrounding towns. I tried to locate where a killer might, logically, discard a body.

It was a long week. I must have spent an unhealthy amount of time doing this, because I ended up dreaming about it.

NEWT: “A very vivid dream.” That was what you said to your friend Jackson.

HERMANN: We do a lot of processing in our sleep. It must have manifested in a dream. Either way, when I woke up that morning, it had crystallized.

NEWT: But you led them right to the body. That isn’t logic.

HERMANN: No. It was luck.

NEWT: (incredulous) Luck?

HERMANN: I was young. I may have had a... flair for the dramatic. That affected the manner in which I presented my “theory.” But I was certain I could find him. So I led Jacks and the others along a path that took us through every location I had thought would make logical sense.

NEWT: So it wasn’t direct?

HERMANN: No. I took a route that touched many possible places along the way. And it was by that pool that we finally found him.

NEWT: But you told Jackson Styll that he was in a pond, in a clearing.

HERMANN: No... That wasn’t what I said. I told Jackson that pool was one of the many places we might find him. If that’s what he said, he’s misremembering.

NEWT: But you saw it in a dream. Right?

HERMANN: At the time, I thought so.
NEWT: So Jackson thinking you led him directly to Alex...

HERMANN: ...is a construction. I told him about the dream. I told him I knew where the body might be. Then, against all odds, we actually found it there. That discovery alone, for a group of kids, is traumatic enough to create a shock. The shock on top of the unlikelihood—it all combined to reformat his memories.

NEWT: Well. Maybe yours too.

HERMANN: Maybe so.

NEWT: Afterwards... did you know Jackson thought you were psychic? Like, did you ever talk about it again?

HERMANN: I didn’t like talking about it. Jacks... well.

(beat)

NEWT: (...) Did you see anything else that day?

HERMANN: What do you mean?

NEWT: I ask because when Jackson described you getting up and leaving his friend's house, he said you seemed to see something. Outside the window. Do you remember that?

HERMANN: No.

NEWT: You didn’t see anything out there?

HERMANN: Nothing I can remember.

NEWT: Okay. So then, what, fifteen years later... You convinced yourself you could rekindle this ability. To find someone else.

HERMANN: Yes. I was desperate... I gave in to the impulse. It was a lapse of judgement.

NEWT: You tried to be psychic.

HERMANN: And failed. Obviously.

NEWT: And set up the Gottlieb Institute?

HERMANN: That’s right.

NEWT: So... I have to ask again. Are the black tapes all connected?

HERMANN: (low) I don’t know.

NEWT: Do you think they might be?

HERMANN: I don’t know.

(someone picks up a glass)

HERMANN: Could I ask you something?

NEWT: (with faux solicitude) I think that's my line.
HERMANN: (...) How did you read the code on the painting? When we discovered it?

NEWT: Read it? I didn’t read the Capovolto Code.

HERMANN: But you read something. You read me a short verse. All I saw were letters and numbers.

NEWT: Right... Well, like, I thought I did. It was weird. When I look at the photo I took of the painting, I don’t see any words. I just see the code, like usual. I was pretty hyped up at the time, so I thought I saw something. I was probably just seeing patterns... Pareidolia, if you will.

HERMANN: (wry) I believe that’s my line.

NEWT: (laughs)

(someone sets down a glass)

NEWT: So... and you don’t have to answer this. I’ve just been wondering. Were you surprised by what Vanessa told you tonight?

HERMANN: (flat) Was I surprised that my ex-wife was a secret agent?

NEWT: Well, yeah. Like, did you... ever think something was up?

HERMANN: While we were together, you mean?

NEWT: Yeah.

HERMANN: (...) As I said before... I attributed it to an affair. But even at the time, that seemed... wrong.

NEWT: So did this make more sense?

HERMANN: In a strange way? Yes. (pause) After so many years of wondering... It isn’t exactly good news. It carries a lot of sinister implications about the rest of my life. But I'm still... I’m glad I know.

NEWT: Why?

HERMANN: (slowly) It puts some things into place. Things about which I’ve been confused.

NEWT: (quickly) Like what?

(long silence)

(movement, muffled click)

Beep. Hermann reached for Newt’s phone, where it rested between them on the coffee table, and stopped the recording.

“Turn off your other one.”

“My other what?” Newt said, taken aback.

“Newton.”
Hermann stared at him, eyes sharp. Newt's heart was suddenly thumping.

Then Hermann leaned forward across the table. He reached into Newt’s breast pocket and pulled the backup recorder out. The little red light was on.

But instead of turning it off, he held it up to Newt’s mouth.

“Ask again.”

“What—?” said Newt, flustered.

“Ask your question.”

His voice was low and flat as a blade.

“...What is causing your confusion?” Newt said.

Hermann pulled the recorder from Newt’s mouth and held it to his own. “You.”

Newt stared at him, wide-eyed.

The recorder in Hermann’s hand hovered in the air between them. He moved to flick it off, barely a twitch—but Newt’s hand closed around his wrist. Stopping him.

He looked up at Newt. The journalist was staring at him with tractor beam eyes.

Newt tightened his grip on his wrist.

In a clatter the recorder fell to the table and they were kissing, Newt clasping Hermann’s cheeks and Hermann grasping for purchase on his wrinkled white shirt. Professional boundaries burned like bridges in both their minds. Newt, for one, was leaping right from the fire into the river. He kissed his subject with a fervor that could only be described as fascination. Hermann kissed him back with a passion that belied his aloof manner, or perhaps that perpetually thundered behind its locked door.

Hermann tugged Newt by the arm, already trying to pull him closer across the two feet of varnished walnut between them. Pulled off balance, Newt dropped a hand onto the table to steady himself. Was Hermann going to drag him straight over his own living room furniture?

In the half-second gap chasing Hermann’s lips, he felt the two-foot air gap between their bodies like a cliff drop he was scoping for a base jump. He imagined the free fall with his gut. He thought of all the slopes and planes of Hermann under those clothes—not in the vague way he had often imagined them, but in an immediate and material and urgently real way. If he jumped, he was going to find out.

He wanted to.

Their lips met again, and Hermann let out a tiny gasp that made Newt shiver. Almost enough to push him off the cliff. Hermann’s left hand found his arm and wrapped round it, ran down and up again, and tugged. Towards himself, across the solid distance that stood like a sword planted between them.

“What—” he managed.

Hermann tugged his arm again.

Newt tugged back. “Hermann—” He pulled his mouth back as best he could. “How, exactly, do you expect me to get—”
“Newton,” Hermann said, leaning further forward and kissing him again, “For once—would you shut up?”

Newt pulled farther back, drawing Hermann further forward. “So that’s how it is?”

Hermann caught him again. “Yes.”

“Mm,” Newt articulated. “Mmkay”

Unable to accept reality or unwilling to navigate it with grace, Newt shoved forward and put his knee onto the table. Hermann made a muffled exclamatory noise. Newt climbed onto the coffee table. There was a thump as, predictably, he knocked a glass to the floor.

“Newton!”

“Excuse me,” Newt said, kneeling on the table. He secured his new upper position by wrapping his arms around Hermann’s shoulders. “I thought this was what you wanted me to do. Was I misreading your signals?”

“Yes—” Hermann said, before Newt cut him off.

“Yes,” Hermann tried again a moment later, breathless, “And I—”

“Oh, excuse me, I thought we were shutting up?” Newt said, pulling back slightly, grinning. Hermann was already satisfyingly flustered. Advantage: Newt. “Was that not the plan?”

“I hope you know...” Hermann broke off, distracted, as Newt began kissing under his jaw.

“Yes?”

Newt kissed his neck.

“About you being quiet...” Hermann tipped his head back.

“Yes?”

“It is not my preference.”

Newt paused, lips on his throat.

“Are you telling me you like the sound of my voice, Dr. Gottlieb?” he asked.

“I think you are good at your job,” Hermann replied, his voice drawn sharp by his stretched vocal cords.

“Mm,” Newt said into his neck, unbalanced both by the compliment and by Hermann’s hands on his waist. “You heard me... didn’t you?”

“In the hotel room?”

Newt’s breath caught. Hermann was rubbing arcs with his thumbs in Newt’s soft sides. “Yes.”

“Yes,” Hermann said. “I did.”

“I thought you were asleep.”

“You liar,” Hermann murmured, continuing his bilateral shirt interference. “You knew.”
Newt reasserted his conversational upper hand by lightly biting Hermann’s neck.

Hermann inhaled in surprise and tightened his grip. Newt exhaled, grinning. He bit again, but his smile put a damper on the effectiveness. Hermann made a noise that could have been either distress or approval. Newt kissed his neck again.

“You are absurd,” Hermann murmured as he moved back up.

“One of my most attractive qualities, I’m told,” Newt said, and kissed him again.

Newt exhaled, short and sharp as Hermann’s probing thumb found the scooped hem of his dress shirt, which, riding up from exertion, exposed a triangle of skin. Hermann wasted no time in pulling the rest of the hem out of his pants.

"Your information is faulty,” said Hermann as his hands slid up the back of Newt's shirt.

After a moment, Hermann put real pressure on his back to draw him forward. Newt acquiesced, and climbed off the table and onto Hermann’s lap, pushing him against the back of the couch. He ended up straddling him, legs tucked on either side of the doctor’s, making sure his weight was off his left leg. Newt rubbed the back of Hermann's neck, stroking the stubble of his cropped hair. He had wanted to touch it for so long. He kissed Hermann slowly, with all the temporal unconcern of the post-midnight hours and the months of waiting. He worked round the perimeter of his mouth like a flame licking the edge of a slip of paper.

At length Hermann broke away, kissing Newt’s cheek and then his jaw.

“Newton,” he murmured.

“Mhm?”

“I'm sorry for making you wait.”

“You needed your time,” Newt replied softly.

“And you didn’t?”

“Mm-mm,” Newt replied in the negative, stroking his cropped hair.

Hermann kissed the shell of his ear.

“In December...”

“When you planted one on me? Or when you ghosted me?”

“I was afraid. I left.” Hermann kissed his neck. “I shouldn’t have.”

“But you came back.”

“I had to.” Hermann paused again. “But when I did, I felt worse than ever. I had no idea how to act towards you. And I felt guilty, for leaving, for my feelings when my missing spouse was out there somewhere... guilty for compromising your work, and mine...”

“What changed?” Newt asked softly.

Hermann lifted his face and put his forehead against Newt’s. Newt kept stroking his hair.
“When you got sick, I was very upset.” Newt shifted uncomfortably. “While you were on leave, I realized I had to uncouple my feelings about you from the feelings I was tormenting myself with. The guilt, the upset. I realized if I never did that...” Hermann closed his eyes. “Relationship or no relationship, if I never disassociated you from that, I would never have the least chance of happiness.”

Newt’s hand slowed. He stared at him in up-close surprise. “Just like that? You just snapped yourself out of it?” Hermann opened his eyes and met Newt’s. Newt smiled. “You analytical bastard.”


He closed the gap and kissed Newt slowly. Eyes closed, Newt pictured him alone in August, repainting and refurnishing his house room by room, rearranging his thoughts until they were hospitable.

“That’s remarkable,” Newt murmured when they broke apart. “Honestly. You’ll have to tell me how you pulled that one off.”

“You are not difficult to make space for,” Hermann said, looking him in the eyes.

Newt smiled, warm and abashed.

Hermann slipped his hands back up under Newt’s shirt. He ran his hands over Newt’s stomach and around his waist.

“Then there was the issue of my spouse,” Hermann said.

“Right,” Newt said, a bit breathily, trying not to squirm at the press of Hermann’s thumbs into his hips. “That little issue.”

Hermann exhaled what passed for a laugh. “Well.”

“Well?”

“Even if I had been ready,” Hermann said, “I had to resolve things with her first. Even after all this time.”

Newt understood. Hermann’s conscience would not have allowed it otherwise.

“Mm... But once you did,” Newt leaned in close and murmured in his ear in his most fake-lascivious-but-really-real voice, “You wasted absolutely no time...”

Hermann actually laughed, squeezing Newt’s sides. Newt laughed too, and nosed the curve of Hermann’s ear.

“Apologies—” Hermann said, sounding rather breathless himself. Was he sensitive about his ears? “Perhaps I’ve rushed into things.”

“Undeniably,” Newt whispered into his ear, grinning. “You are too forward, Dr. Gottlieb. Give me another year and a half to think it over.” He closed his teeth around Hermann’s earlobe, which earned him a disproportionately startled grunt and then a swat. Newt pulled back, laughing.

“Stop that,” Hermann said, and Newt saw that he was actually a bit flushed.

“Sorry,” said Newt, grinning. He kissed him, still smiling.
“But—Newton?”

“Mhm?”

“What about you? Your work?”

Newt hesitated, avoiding Hermann’s gaze.

“We’re not talking about that right now,” he finally said.

“But—”

“Preferably never,” Newt said, sitting back.

“Alright.”

Hermann’s hands had slowed to a stop on his waist. Newt looked, unseeingly, back and forth between Hermann’s brown eyes, his mind skirting the dark sinkhole he had, so far, been successfully steering clear of.

What was he going to do?

It was one thing to have daydreams in direct conflict-of-interest with your day job.

But this...

It’s over.

The words came from the sinkhole in his head. It's over. It's over. The show couldn’t go on, not now.

It was over.

With new momentum, the force of abandon, Newt pushed forward and kissed Hermann. Hermann made a muffled noise of surprise but responded in kind. Newt slid his fingers up into the longer locks of his hair and tightened his grip.

If he was going to burn it down, he was going to burn it all down.

Hermann seemed to see some of that in his eyes when he pulled back again. Newt moved to undo his tie, but Hermann caught his hands.

“Wait.”

They stared at each other.

“Let me.”

Newt let his hands down slowly. The flames were licking at his stomach.

Hermann loosened the knot. He did not break eye contact. Newt tipped his chin back but didn’t break it either. Hermann didn’t pull the tail out—he untied the knot completely and let the ends fall, draped around Newt’s neck.

Leaning in close, Hermann undid the top button of his shirt. It was actually the second button—Newt never buttoned the top one, he didn’t like the constriction. Hermann mouthed at the exposed skin of
his neck. He wondered, as Hermann opened the next button, if he had thought about that open button and loose tie knot the same way Newt had thought about Hermann’s hands and the short hair on the back of his head. He opened the next one.

Hermann kissed his neck below the ear and said, “Lie down.”

Newt did so. Hermann tipped him and he lay back on the couch. Hermann sat on his legs. He undid Newt’s last few buttons, then bent down and kissed his chest. He ran his hands over Newt’s stomach, up his sides, over his chest, and up over his collarbone, so lightly he was barely touching him. Newt breathed out slowly, like he was exhaling smoke. Hermann moved more slowly than before, but Newt’s stomach twisted into tighter knots than ever.

Hermann pushed his sleeve off his shoulder, revealing the dense tattoo tapestry concealed there.

“Surprised?” Newt said weakly, lifting his head slightly to look. Hermann was leaning close, studying them. “A full sleeve is considered unprofessional, so I’m keeping it confined to the t-shirt zone until my 401K is secure. But after that...”

“I’m not surprised,” Hermann said softly. “I knew they were there.”

“You did?”

“I could see them,” Hermann murmured. “I saw them through your shirts.”

Newt shivered.

Hermann leaned in and kissed him again. Newt matched his slow, heavy pace. Hermann worked his fingers through Newt’s messy hair. When Hermann pulled away, he was not breathless. Nor was he smiling. Newt stared up at him. He leaned over Newt, hand braced on the couch, mostly not touching him. His cheeks were flushed. His hair was disorderly.

Newt dipped his head to say, Well? and slid his hands up under the hem of Hermann’s sweater. Obligingly the doctor pulled it off. Then he leaned back over Newt and let him take care of his dress shirt’s many buttons.

Open, it revealed a sleeveless undershirt. Newt pushed the shirt back over his shoulders and it landed behind him on Newt’s ankles.

Hermann leaned slowly back in, his hands running down to Newt’s stomach. His heart was thrumming there, right beneath Hermann’s southward-moving hands. He closed his eyes, sinking his head back...

But right as his eyes closed, he heard a gasp. Hermann’s hands disappeared from his stomach.

Newt opened his eyes.

“Hermann?”

His colleague was sitting up, leaning back, looking startled. No—not just startled. Shaken. His eyes were wide. The color had drained from his face.

“Hermann?” Newt said again, hiking himself up on his elbows. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“I... Yes,” Hermann said. He shook his head, then squeezed his eyes shut, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Sorry.”
“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing—” Hermann shook his head again. “Nothing, I just thought I saw something. I was just imagining things. It’s nothing... I’m alright.”

Newt sat up as best he could, and touched Hermann’s arm.

“Saw something?”

Hermann exhaled and opened his eyes. “It’s nothing. I’m sorry.”

“Oh...”

“Okay...”

“Huh?”

Hermann was reaching for his face, eyes wide again— “Are you bleeding?”

“Am I—?”

Newt reached quickly for his nose. But there was nothing. Newt felt no blood there. He pulled his hand away and looked. His fingers were clean.

“No, I don’t think I am.” Newt looked up at Hermann, panic allayed but worry mounting.

“I’m sorry.” Hermann frowned. “It must have been a shadow.”

“You feeling alright, Doc?” Newt said. “Was that two consecutive hallucinations in the space of sixty seconds?”

“No... No,” Hermann said, composure mostly restored. “Tricks of the light.”

“I feel like I’ve heard that one before,” Newt said, sitting up fully. Hermann shifted to let his legs free. The air felt a lot colder on his exposed chest than it had before. “I’d better go check, anyway.”

“There’s a bathroom at the top of the stairs,” Hermann said. Newt stood up stiffly from the couch. “I’ll bring your things.”

“Upstairs?”

Newt shivered, half with cold, half with his full knowledge of the first floor bathroom.

He had never been upstairs.

“Yes,” Hermann said, looking up into Newt’s eyes with fully visible nerves. “My room is the door to the left.”

“Such presumptuousness, Dr. Gottlieb,” he said, mustering all the faux affront he could while shivering with his shirt open in his journalistic subject’s living room, said subject in his undershirt before him. A bid to reassure them both.

He saw Hermann’s face relax slightly.

“Go,” was all he said.

Upstairs in the bathroom, Newt flipped on the light and shut the door. He took a second to brace
himself against the sink and exhale dramatically, then to run his hands through his hair and rub his eyes under his glasses, then to make a prolonged study of his own face. Nothing to get spooked at, as far as he could see. No blood.

He breathed out, rubbing his jaw. It was strange, the first time you kissed someone. For hours after, you could still feel all the places they’d touched you, like a phantom limb.

Newt passed his fingers lightly over his lips. Then he pulled off his glasses, turned on the water, and splashed himself a few times. He dried off his face and put his glasses back on. More out of habit than hope, he gave himself a once-over. He was extremely disheveled. His hair was a nightmare, and he had passed 5 o’clock and was approaching 10 o’clock shadow. He moved to take off his tie, at least, then left it. Hermann had left it. Maybe it was doing something for him. The undershirt was certainly working for Newt.

His hand lingering on the light switch, he studied his reflection once again. Was something wrong? Would he be able to tell? He shook his head. What would even be wrong?

Newt opened the bathroom door and stepped hesitantly into the rhombus of bathroom light on the hall floor. The only other light came from the bottom of the stairs. Otherwise, all was shadow on the second floor. Including the room next door. Newt hadn’t heard Hermann on the stairs, and the light was off. So he wasn’t in there, probably.

After a moment’s hesitation, Newt flicked off the bathroom light. Then he heard what sounded, for all the world, like a voice from another room.

A voice that was not Hermann’s.

Fear rushed through him. He flipped the light back on.

Nothing. He heard nothing else.

He saw nothing.

The light from the bathroom did not travel far outside the rhombus below his socked feet. The dark air was dense. Nothing moved through it. Not even sound.

Newt heard nothing else at all.

Maybe it had been the wind, or a tree, or just his overactive imagination. Or maybe the house was haunted to hell. That, at least, would make some sense.

But for a tense moment in the doorway, all the stories of the last year and a half—all of them were myths, lies, fabrications engineered to send shivers down the spines of public radio listeners. None of it was real.

This was what was real.

Alone in a dark, empty house.

The shadows were harboring something in the absolute black, and every second those patches of light, where he could see a corner of wallpaper or and edge of hardwood, those patches were about to be infested with throbbing shapes crawling from the darkness.

Newt squeezed his eyes shut tight. Then he opened them again, exhaled, and stepped towards Hermann’s door. He left the bathroom light on.
Inside the bedroom, dim blue nighttime light fell through the wide uncurtained window on the far wall. He could make out a large bed, and a desk, surprisingly messy, and a glowing analog clock on Hermann’s bedside table (of course it was analog, he thought). It showed that the time was 3:40.

Newt stepped in hesitantly, feeling like a cat burglar. His heart rate was slowing back down, but fallout adrenaline was trickling in. He felt shaky. He reached for a light switch, but his hand only found blank wall.

The floor creaked behind him. Newt whirled around just in time to see undershirted Hermann in the doorway. Then Hermann was on him in the dark, kissing him intensively once again. Hermann’s hands were shockingly cold on Newt’s skin; Newt’s own hands were shaking.

“Jesus—you scared me,” Newt managed. Hermann was steering him backwards.

“You’re too jumpy,” Hermann murmured. Newt’s back collided with the wall. He heard a click and a light switched on. With a crackle, his anxiety blazed into adrenaline. Newt wrapped his arms around Hermann’s back and pulled him against himself. Hermann made a muffled noise of satisfaction and kissed Newt against the wall.

All the spots on his body where he’d felt the ghost pressure of Hermann’s touch were filled again. Even over such a short span of time, it already felt like a return to the natural state of things. Perhaps that was a function of waiting. Why, Newt wondered, could you tell the difference, just by touch, between your skin and someone else’s? He ran his fingers along Hermann’s shoulderblades. Not you. Someone else. How could you tell? Because you were not occupying it from the inside? Because you didn’t know the intimate details of where the other body was in space, its velocity and position? (Zeno, don’t distract me, Newt thought. I’m doing an excellent job of closing gaps right now.)

Hermann shifted his grip and clamped Newt’s upper arms, pushing him bodily against the wall. A suppressed sigh escaped Newt. Hermann was going for the full frontal press, hip to sternum. Newt’s arm mobility was now limited. Problem? No. That was fine. He scrabbled at Hermann’s waist and found the hem of his shirt, then slid his hands under it. Hermann exhaled from his nose.

And did he wish he was—wish he was occupying that space? Unifying, Plato-style? No, Newt thought. He didn’t get that thing, that want-you-so-bad-I-want-to-be-you thing, he really didn’t. He was Newt. How could he enjoy this if he wasn’t? Sometimes sex was a way to get out of yourself, he supposed. If you were into that—self-effacement. He wasn’t. But maybe Hermann was? Newt liked being Newt.

Did Hermann like being Hermann?

It was hard to tell.

It did seem like he was doing his best to occupy the same physical space as Newt at the moment. Newt wriggled his arms in a bid for freedom, or at least leniency, but Hermann did not give. Fine. Then Newt was going on the offensive. He dipped his fingertips into the back of Hermann’s tightly belted slacks. He had limited reach but he would use it. He dug his fingers deeper, somewhere near the base of Hermann’s spine, and slid them around front. With constricted difficulty he circumnavigated Hermann’s bony hips and made it to the front before he realized the grip on his arms must have relaxed, because otherwise he would not have the range to reach Hermann’s front like this.

Advantage: Newt?
Hermann’s hands were still on his arms and his mouth was still, purportedly, in charge of Newt’s; but his grip was slack and his lips felt distracted. Newt could make that worse, he decided. He slipped his hands out of Hermann’s pants and went for the belt.

Hermann made a surprised nonverbal sound, but Newt kept on. With a clink he unbuckled his belt, fumbled the button open, and dove his hand down the front of Hermann’s pants. Hermann inhaled, mouth going lax against Newt’s. Newt grinned, breathing out a quiet, exhilarated laugh. Hermann-Newt-wall pressure decreased as Newt-hand-pants friction increased. Hermann leaned on his arms, more for support now. His face drifted away from Newt's, eyes closed, absorbed.

Newt laid a hand on the back of Hermann’s neck as he upped the pace. Hermann dropped his head onto Newt’s shoulder. Newt rubbed his thumb along Hermann’s cervical vertebrae. Hermann groaned quietly.

Should he? Maybe it was unfair—but he had to. Newt slid his hand down and rubbed his thumb along the the helix of Hermann’s ear. In response Hermann buried his face helplessly between Newt's neck and shoulder. His breath was hot against Newt, his mouth slack. Newt rubbed his ear once more. Hermann made a sound which Newt could not hear, but which vibrated in his collarbone.

Newt relented, pulling his hand out of Hermann’s pants and clumsily kissing him on the top of the head. Hermann raised his head. He was catching his breath. Newt offered a grin. Hermann’s eyes were heavy, dazed but rapidly clearing. They were filling instead with intent.

Newt’s smile widened.

Hermann turned them around and steered Newt backwards towards the bed. In the absence of his cane, he put a lot of weight on Newt’s arms. His mouth did not smile but his eyes were bright. Hungry little flames. Somewhat alarming, maybe, Newt thought. But in a hot way.

“I think your house is haunted,” Newt commented as the back of his legs hit the box spring. Hermann, gently but firmly, shoved him down. Newt fell back obediently. “You might want to look into that.”

“I’ll get right on it,” Hermann replied, still standing, taking off his slacks. Newt watched, on his back, lying on top of the blanket—his shirt still on but scandalously open, pants still on and scandalously fastened.

“Nice boxers,” Newt couldn’t help but say, grinning stupidly. They were tartan. The light was low but Newt thought he could see Hermann’s cheeks turn a brighter shade of red. “Wouldn’t have pegged you for a boxer guy, if you had asked me—”

“And I didn’t,” Hermann said, climbing onto the bed.

“Well,” Newt said as Hermann approached over him, knees between Newt’s legs. “I like them.”

“Back up,” Hermann said. Newt obliged, scooting backwards until his head bumped a pillow.

“Far enough for y—” Hermann sank down and kissed him before he could finish his question. Newt kissed him back, sighing, languidly lifting his knees up around Hermann’s legs.

But Hermann caught his legs in hand and pushed them back down. He slid his hands up Newt’s thighs to his waist and, with a jarringly loud noise, pulled away from Newt’s lips.

“I take it back,” Hermann said as he slid downward. “You do talk too much.”
“Wow—” Newt said, breathless as Hermann kissed his stomach. He seemed to maybe have a thing about Newt’s stomach. “Are you telling me to be quiet?”

He could feel Hermann’s breath on the hairs at the base of his stomach. Was that his mouth on the button of his pants?

“I didn’t say that.”

Newt was panting distractedly. “Then what do you...”

In lieu of a reply, Hermann unsnapped his button and unzipped his fly. He divested Newt of his pants with some help in the form of definitely non-agitated leg kicking. “Fewer words,” Hermann clarified—and then he was running his hands back up Newt’s bare legs, pushing them open, and going down on him before Newt had time for any reply that was remotely verbal.

Newt’s mind started and stopped proceedings on a number of thoughts, unable to complete even a mental sentence. He was... He was tipping his head back, mouth open uselessly, he was reaching back up towards the pillows for nothing at all. Whatever sounds his mouth was making were outside of his control. His legs engaged in a languid conversation with Hermann’s hands. Hermann’s thumbs were rubbing the soft insides of his thighs in a way that was, while not the most absorbing thing being done in that vicinity, distracting nonetheless. Without much conscious input Newt’s knees lifted slowly, legs drifting up and open wider. Hermann applied himself in the open space.

Newt groaned and rubbed his foot against whatever it was currently touching, which seemed to be Hermann’s ribs. Hermann hummed around him in response. Newt closed his eyes— “Ah—Hermann,” he managed. “You should slow down—”

For a second Newt thought he would do the opposite just to assert himself—kind of fair—but then he pulled away. Newt opened his eyes. Hermann’s face was very flushed, almost embarrassingly so. Newt was a little dizzy. A lot of blood had just rushed to or from his head. He went for the hem of Hermann’s undershirt. Hermann pulled it off.

He levered Newt to sit up and slid his shirt the rest of the way off. Then he got sidetracked by the reveal of the rest of Newt’s tattoos—his quarter sleeves wrapped around his upper back. Hermann ran his fingertips over the lines and swatches in slow fascination.

“Working for you?” Newt murmured. “Wouldn’t have predicted that.”

Hermann kissed his shoulder by way of a reply, and then his mouth. He broke away, eyes moving behind Newt. Newt looked at him questioningly from up close.

“Oh a moment,” Hermann murmured, putting a hand on Newt’s shoulder. “Lie back down.”

Newt did so and Hermann reached over him for the bedside table. He heard the sound of the drawer sliding open, and then halting.

Hermann reappeared over him. “Hold still.”

Newt wasn’t sure what for, but obeyed. Hermann reached for his face and slid his glasses off. Oh. The room plunged into a low-lit subaquatic haze. The shape formerly known as Hermann leaned away again, and Newt heard the click of his glasses on the bedside table, then the drawer opening fully, and objects being taken out. He shivered. Air was touching more of him than it had in a while, and his skin remembered that it was, in fact, a mid-November night. He heard the sound of a wrapper opening and then felt Hermann’s hand on his chest, steadying.
“Are you cold?” Hermann’s voice said softly. Newt nodded.

“Yeah,” he said. His voice came out a whisper.

He felt the covers move next to him and allowed himself to be encouraged under them. Without his glasses, he was now, effectively, flying blind. Newt was used to that in sexual contexts; at a certain point he had to work mostly by feel, and there was a low-level thrill of suspense and instinct to that. Nonetheless the pause now, with him alone under the sheets, seemed to be getting long, and he didn’t know why. The sounds he was hearing were unclear. Maybe Hermann was having technical difficulties; maybe he was having second thoughts at the altar. Maybe he was moving towards him by descending half-increments and would never actually reach him, trapped in a paradox; but then, maybe time would progress in that same way for Newt, half smaller and half smaller, and maybe the minute of waiting would never end for either of them. Stop. Focus. Don’t think about Zeno. Don’t think about momentum. Think about friction. He felt the mattress move. Think about continuity, infinitesimals—Hermann lifted the sheet and leaned over Newt—infinitiesmals down to the infinitely tiniest point, so small it takes up no space, so small it isn’t small at all, it isn’t space, it’s zero space. That’s how close I want to get, Newt thought, as Hermann slid into place on top of him, as he pulled the sheet back over them. That’s how close.

Hermann obliged him.

“Are they following you?”

The question was asked so softly under the sheet, and at such a contextual distance from the million other times and places Newton had posed it to him before, that Hermann actually let it reach his ears.

“I don’t know,” Hermann whispered back after a pause.

Newt adjusted his position minutely. His eyes were closed.

“You saw one of them, that day,” Newt said quietly. It was not a question.

Hermann nodded minutely.

But Newt could not see that. So he whispered: “Yes.”

“Out the window of Jackson’s friend’s house.”

“Yes.”

“Just standing there?”

“That was all. When I got outside, it was gone.”

“How many times did you...”


Newt didn’t open his eyes or say a word. But Hermann felt him tense under his hand, saw his eyelids flutter tight. Like the confession hit with all the physical force of a tiny splash of water.

“Still?”

“Not often since I was a teenager.”
“But sometimes?”

“Not for a long time.”

“...What do they want from you?”

“I don’t know.”

“But they want something.”

Hermann hesitated. He gazed at Newton in the warm under-sheet shadow, so close and quiet with his heavy eyelids and without his glasses. He rubbed his thumb slowly against Newton’s cheek.

“Yes,” Hermann breathed. It was barely a sound.

The moment sat for a long while between them.

“What are we going to do?” Newt said at last.

Hermann shook his head slightly against the pillow. “Nothing. What do you mean?”

“I mean—” Newt shifted, but still didn’t open his eyes. “I mean. You’re not safe. Rothco is monitoring you. The damn cult was spying on you for your whole life. They planted your spouse. And, and the... those...”

Newt didn’t complete that sentence. Hermann said nothing.

“There’s nowhere to run,” Hermann murmured after a moment.

“You don’t know that.”

“I do,” Hermann said.

“I’d go with you.”

“Stop that.”

“I would!”

“There’s nowhere to run,” Hermann whispered again. “They won’t lose me.”

“Rothco can’t be ev—”

“I’m not talking about Rothco.”

Newt fell silent. He opened his eyes.

Hermann said nothing more.

When he finally drifted off to sleep, Hermann’s dreams roiled in fearful, humid technicolor. He dreamed he was an interdimensional spelunker, traversing tunnels between universes, down into the vast and boundless deep. In one dark world, he and his companions awoke a slumbering monster of incomprehensible size. They fled to the tunnel to seek safety in another dimension but the monster chased them up. It could not be stopped. As they flew, diving through shafts and sulfurous stacks, barely keeping ahead of it, Hermann understood that they could not outrun it, not ever. They could not hide, they could not flee, they could not stop. Unless they killed it, it would kill
Hermann woke late. He was alone.

He found Newt downstairs, standing in the screened-in porch, facing the frozen landscape outside. The sky was still darkly cloudy, giving the impression it was much later or earlier than it was.

Newton stood very still. Something about his stillness made Hermann hesitate in the doorway. Newton shivered once, like a tremor.

“Newton?”

Newton turned—just his head. Then the rest of him seemed to wake, turning round to look at Hermann. His expression was strange.

“Oh—hey.”

“What are you doing down here?”

“I don’t know,” Newt said.

Hermann walked over to him, an awkward limp without his cane. He touched Newton’s arm. Ice cold.

“Newton, you’re frozen,” he said, putting his hands on Newton’s shoulders and then his cheeks. “How long have you been down here?”

“I don’t know,” Newt said. “I don’t... I don’t remember coming down here.”

Hermann frowned. “Did you sleepwalk?”

“I don’t think so—” Newt said. “I don’t think I slept.”

“At all?”

“Well, I haven’t been,” Newton said, voice getting hoarser.

“Sleeping?” Hermann said dumbly.

Newt shook his head.

“At all? As in not one hour?”

“No... Not for a while. Not since Quebec City.”

Hermann looked horrified. “But that was weeks ago.”

Newton shook his head again.

“It’s not possible, Newton,” Hermann said. Despite himself, his mind jumped to what he had seen—imagined—the night before. Those terrible eyes. “You would be nonfunctioning. You would be a vegetable. You cannot survive that long without sleeping.”

“I... I feel fine,” Newt said, moving his head so Hermann’s hands dropped away.

“If you can’t remember, you must have been asleep,” he said, his voice closing up like a shut box.
His eyes swept over Newt. “You must have sleepwalked down here...” His eyes stopped at Newton’s feet.

Newt followed his gaze down.

“What?”

“...Your feet are dirty.”

Newt looked. His socked feet were muddy, with bits of yellow grass stuck to them. He lifted his left foot. There was a spot of blood on his sole.

He looked back up at Hermann. “Did I go somewhere?”

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**SPONSOR BREAK**

**NEWT (VO):** We headed back down to Cambridge on Friday morning.

(sound of car door closing)

NEWT: Thanks for driving me down.

HERMANN: *(stiff)* Of course. We’re going the same place.

(phone buzzes)

(engine starts)

NEWT: Whoa... I have like... a million missed calls from...

(phone buzzes)

(phone buzzes)

(phone buzzes)

(phone continues buzzing)

NEWT: Oh [expletive bleeped].

HERMANN: What’s the matter?

NEWT: It’s Mako. She’s freaking out. I better call.

(phone rings)

(Mako picks up after one ring)

MAKO: *(muffled over phone)* Newt?

NEWT: Hey—what’s going on? Is everything okay?

MAKO: Newt! Oh, thank god. I’ve been trying to call you. Where have you been? Are you alright?

NEWT: I’m sorry, my phone died last night. Of course I’m okay! What’s—
MAKO: Are you with Dr. Gottlieb?

NEWT: Yeah. We’re on our way in.

MAKO: From the harbor?

NEWT: No—we left last night. What?

MAKO: So you didn’t go to Rainsford Island?

NEWT: No. I sent you a text. We got intercepted and went back to shore. It’s... kind of a crazy story, actually...

MAKO: I didn’t get a text.

NEWT: Oh. (brief pause) Oh no, it looks like it didn’t go through. [expletive bleeped], sorry, Mako. I didn’t mean to freak you out.

MAKO: I wasn’t upset when I didn’t hear from you last night. I was a little worried. But then I woke up this morning and saw the news. And when I checked my phone, you still hadn’t called. That was when I panicked. And then I went into the office and everyone was talking about the fire and the signals and you still...

NEWT: Whoa whoa, what news? I haven’t seen the news. What’s going on? What signal?

MAKO: The Coast Guard got called into the harbor this morning. There’s a massive fire on Rainsford Island.

NEWT: What?!

MAKO: The whole island is burning. You can see it from shore. Turn on FOX 25, they’re showing it right now.

NEWT: I can’t, we’re in the car—holy [expletive bleeped]. Do they know what caused it?

MAKO: Not yet. And they have no way of slowing it down. It’s too powerful. They can’t figure out what's fueling it until it goes out, and they can’t put it out. They just have to keep it contained.

NEWT: Wow... (turning) Hermann. Quarantine Island is on fire.

HERMANN: What?

MAKO: (on phone) So you never got there?

NEWT: (back to phone) No—we got intercepted. I’ll tell you—but what was it you said about a signal?

MAKO: Well the Coast Guard said the other reason they’re having trouble putting it out is their radio signals are getting jammed in the harbor.

NEWT: What? How?

MAKO: There’s some kind of interference in the area. Elaine said—

NEWT: Elaine Sanders?
MAKO: No, Elaine from Production. She called the Trade Center too, and the Harbor Police. All the radio signals in the harbor are getting jammed. It’s already disrupting shipping and water traffic.

NEWT: Do they think it’s connected to the fire?

MAKO: They don’t know yet.

NEWT (VO): We got to the office about an hour later. (Thanks a lot, 128.) Mako was relieved to see us alive but she was pretty pissed at me for being so late.

NEWT: Did something else happen?

MAKO: (stressed) Yes. I just got off the phone with [expletive bleeped] Sheriff Collins.

NEWT: Whoa! Mako!

MAKO: He said—I’m sorry, not professional. (exhales) He said Robert Motherwell was found dead in his cell this morning.

NEWT: What?

HERMANN: How? What happened?

MAKO: Blunt force trauma to the head. His skull was caved in. There was blood on the wall. It appears—unless someone else broke in, and no one else is seen on the security tape—it appears that he bashed his own head in.

NEWT: Good god.

HERMANN: When did this happen?

MAKO: Last night.

NEWT: Busy night. Yikes.

MAKO: Well, that wasn’t all. Look at this. (rolling chair noise) This was taken on the inside of his cell. It’s on the wall. Look above the blood.

NEWT: Oh... oh my god. That’s the symbol of the Cult of Tiamat.

MAKO: Yes. Collins said it was done with charcoal. He also said Motherwell’s book has gone missing from evidence lockup.

NEWT: Really? The, uh, “prayer book”?

MAKO: Yes. They checked on it after they found his body, and it was gone. They don’t know how long it’s been gone for.

NEWT: Okay... so obviously, this is connected to his cult activity. Could it be someone trying to keep his mouth shut?

MAKO: He hadn’t exactly been chatty about cult secrets.

NEWT: I guess not. Maybe it was suicide, then. Ritualistic suicide?

HERMANN: That seems most likely. If it was self-inflicted, he probably drew the symbols himself
as well. He was familiar with the content of this podcast. It’s possible he got the idea from you in the first place.

*(interlude music #5)*

NEWT (VO): Dr. G left for a few hours—he had things to do across the river at his office. Mako tried to get an update from the Coast Guard but they weren’t in a chatty mood. According to the emergency press brief that WGBH got sometime after lunch, the fire was contained on the island, but not slowing down. Communications were still being disrupted.

I played Mako the audio from the night before and explained what had happened. Then we got to work editing it.

Later that afternoon, I got an email from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum about the authentication process for *Il Sorriso Capovolto*.

NEWT: Finally...

MAKO: Did they say why it’s been taking so long?

NEWT: Yes, actually. Whoever had possession of it—*(door opens)* Hermann—hey. You’re just in time.

HERMANN: Hello. *(door closes)* What for?

NEWT: The ISG finally answered me about the painting authentication.

*(objects being set down)*

HERMANN: Really? Is it the genuine article?

NEWT: They think so. But the reason it’s taking so long is that it’s been painted *over*. Someone painted on top of the original.

HERMANN: I don’t understand. They painted the same painting over it again?

NEWT: Something close enough to it. That’s what the lab lady said. She said the original is underneath the top layer of paint. That’s why it’s taking so long to authenticate. But that’s also why it looked like it was in such good condition.

HERMANN: Because it was actually “painted” in the last 20 years.

NEWT: Exactly.

MAKO: That’s a new height for art vandalism.

NEWT: Right? It’s kind of f...

HERMANN: Has all of it been tampered with?

NEWT: Huh?

HERMANN: All of the painting—was the whole thing covered?

NEWT: You mean like... including the code?
HERMANN: ...Yes.

NEWT: She said some original parts had been left exposed. (clicking) Uh... Yes. The creepy background face, and the books in front. She said that was how they realized the original was underneath.

HERMANN: So the code is original.


MAKO: Hold on. I don't understand. When would it have been vandalized? She had red in her notes from the eighties. That would mean it was painted over before it was stolen.

HERMANN: That makes no sense.

NEWT: Unless she was lying. Maybe she was a plant. To throw us off the trail.

HERMANN: To what end? We already had the book in our possession. That makes no sense either.

NEWT: It doesn't add up.

HERMANN: What doesn’t?

NEWT: Well. None of it.

HERMANN: Well, certainly. But the mysteries only seem that way from the outside. From the other side, everything fits together logically.

NEWT: (wryly) The “other side” meaning “the Rothco conference room where they plot out their schemes”?

(ping notification sound)

NEWT (VO): Right then, I got another email from station IT. Since Vanessa's message had been intercepted, apparently before the episode aired, I had contacted IT about running a security check on our system. I wanted to know if there was any way they could detect if we had been hacked. A bit of a shot in the dark.

MAKO: Is that tech support already? That must be a record.

NEWT: No—yes, it is, but they didn't run the diagnostic yet. They're just sending me some specs on our... (trails off)

MAKO: Newt?

NEWT: Guys?

MAKO: (concerned) Yeah?

NEWT: The code?

HERMANN: (tense) Yes?

NEWT: You know the number? At the end?
MAKO: Yes?
NEWT: It’s us.
MAKO: What?
HERMANN: What?
NEWT: It’s our IP address, here at the studio. If you add the decimals: 10.136.43.26.
MAKO: Um... That’s odd.
HERMANN: (...) 
NEWT: How is that possible?
HERMANN: How is what possible?
NEWT: How could a number appear on a Renaissance painting that happens to correspond with our IP address? That’s insane.
HERMANN: Coincidences often appear so.
NEWT: (sarcastic) Oh. Right. Coincidence.
HERMANN: What—are you honestly suggesting that this is anything more than a coincidence? Newton—stop and think about it for more than ten seconds. When those numbers were painted, the power of electricity had not yet been harnessed. There is no plane of reality on which Caravaggio anticipated your computer’s IP address.
NEWT: (frustrated) Hermann, do you hear yourself? What are the odds of this?
HERMANN: It doesn’t matter what the odds are. Reality is sometimes unlikely. That changes absolutely nothing. It is still reality. There is no possible connection.
NEWT: (loudly) The number is the connection!
HERMANN: (almost shouting) Connection to what? If this isn’t coincidence, then what? Is it fate? Were we fated to find it?
NEWT: Well what if I—
(Newt falls silent)
(beat)
HERMANN: What? What if what?
NEWT: (...) 
HERMANN: Newton? (suddenly concerned) Is something wrong?
NEWT: They put out the clues so we would follow the trail... but we didn’t actually find anything. They drew us in, put it in plain sight, and led us to it. And I just read it off... just read it off like it was nothing. (horrified) What if I just played right into their plan?
HERMANN: Who is "they"? What are you talking about?
NEWT: Rothco. The Cult of Tiamat. I don't know. Their plan.

HERMANN: What *plan*?

NEWT: The number. It's us. *We* were supposed to find it. *We* were supposed to read it.

HERMANN: Don't be ridiculous.

NEWT: Then explain how I could read it.

HERMANN: Pareidolia. Your synapses were misfiring. You said so yourself. Twelve hours ago, you were perfectly satisfied with that explanation.

NEWT: How could I read it, Hermann? What if it's—(whispering) what if it's me? What if I'm...

HERMANN: No. Stop. *(trying to stay calm but sounding agitated)* Go to the Gardner Museum right now and see if you see the same message again. You won't.

NEWT: It doesn't matter. I already spoke it.

HERMANN: Spoke what? *(upset)* There was nothing there.

NEWT: *(quietly)* The incantation.

HERMANN: There is no incantation. Newton. (...) Nothing is happening. None of this is real.

NEWT (VO): I found myself wishing we hadn't been intercepted on our way to that island. What if we had made it there? I wanted to know what had been done—what answers were there that had been sent up in flames? Any?

At the time of this recording, the radio interference problem is persisting. In fact, it's getting worse. The disruption radius has spread about half a mile onto shore.

The investigations into Robert Motherwell's death, the Caravaggio vandalism, and the disappearance of Raleigh Becket continue. Our podcast is no longer a part of them.

*(outro music begins)*

NEWT (VO): What is a story? At the risk of unbearable pretension, I ask you. Stories are the way humans organize and understand the world around us. You tell yourself the ghost of your grandmother haunts her house because of unfinished business, or because she hid gold coins in the foundation, or just because she misses you; or, you tell yourself your grandmother slipped into oblivion and is finally at peace. You tell yourself these stories because you don't know the truth. But you must believe in something.

Or, alternatively, you must devote yourself to a lifelong crusade to prove a certain truth.

The stories we've shared on this podcast were told by people who believed them. That's the best and only answer we can truly give.

Belief is the story we never stop telling. It doesn't matter if it's true—it can't be. No story ever is. The truth cannot be re-told.

We know this.

All we can do is wait for life to unfold.
(outro music ends)

This has been the Black Tapes Podcast.

And this is Newt Geiszler, signing off.

(silence)

(End of recording.)

Newt heard the car pull up in the lot and the door slam. He didn’t turn around; he recognized the step.

“Newton!”

He kept staring at the ocean.

Hermann reached his side. “Newton,” he said, agitated. “Why have you quit your job?”

“Who told you?”

“Ms. Mori!”

“She tell you where to find me, too?”

“No,” Hermann said. He sounded genuinely angry. “No, I went looking!”

“Well good guessing,” Newt said.

“It didn’t take many guesses,” Hermann said acidly.

Newy turned back to look out over the harbor. They were standing in a parking lot in Hull, beside a low concrete seawall. This was the closest point on the mainland to Quarantine Island. They could see it from where they stood, a little more than a mile out on the water. The sea was as gray as the smoke churning above it.

“It’s still burning,” said Newt.

Hermann threw it a glance. “I can see that.”

“And the signals are still getting disrupted. It’s getting worse.”

A cold gust swept out from the sea. Newt watched the smoke climb in two slow columns.

“Why did you quit?” Hermann asked again, his voice now under control.

“I had to,” Newt said. He finally turned to look at him.

“Why are you running away?”

“I’m not running away,” Newt snapped.

“I know you’re upset about the show ending... but I don’t understand.” Hermann said. It looked like he did understand, to Newt. It looked like he understood but wished he didn’t, and was looking for some other explanation to patch on over it.
“I gave myself the weekend to think about it. I thought about it,” Newt said. “I’m done.”

“Newton,” began Hermann, sounding pained, “If this is because of me, I—”

“No! It’s not your fault!” Newt said over the wind. “It’s my fault. It’s my responsibility. It’s over.” He turned back to the sea. “I finished the last episode and sent it in. They can publish it or not. I don’t care.”

“I don’t believe that for a second,” Hermann snapped.

“I just feel like there’s bigger fish to fry,” Newt shot back.

“Such as?” Hermann said aggressively.

“I don’t know, maybe that?” He pointed towards the burning island. “Maybe the demonic invocation in the cursed painting someone planted for us to find?”

“Are you telling me honestly—” said Hermann with barely contained anger, “Are you telling me honestly that you quit your job because you’re afraid you started the apocalypse?”

“I don’t know! I don’t know!” Newt shouted. He gestured towards the smoke again. “What else could it mean?”

“I’m not going to dignify that with an explanation,” Hermann spat. “You know perfectly well all the reasons that a deserted island might catch fire besides demons.”

“Hermann—” Abruptly, his voice became so small and hoarse the wind could have blown it away. But the wind had died down. “Hermann, what if it’s me? What if I’m the Herald?”

Hermann just shook his head.

“But what if—” Newt’s voice cracked. “What if I am? What if they were following you because you would lead them to me? What if it’s me?”

“No,” Hermann said. “It can’t be you. It can’t be.”

“Why? Because none of this is real?” Newt said, not challenging but fearful—like all he wanted to hear was that he was wrong, that his whole reality was indeed an illusion.

“Yes—no,” said Hermann, wrestling to keep his voice under control. Losing. “No. It cannot be you. All my life I have been made to fear this, this coming of some shadowy something. I have lived with this, this inheritance of terror, beaten into the margins by an anxiety over a fate I never asked for, a fate I never got an answer about no matter how I asked.” His voice was rising. “It has left me alone, it has left me a widower, it has left me a martyr for a cause that brought me no peace of mind—” He grabbed Newt by the arms. “And nothing, nothing has ever come of it. Nothing has happened. Nothing will happen. It is all—lies—it is all empty threats. It is a myth. It cannot be you because it is not anything. It cannot be you. It cannot be.” He shook Newt’s arms. His voice was breaking. “It cannot be you, Newton.”

“But what if you’re wrong?” Newt could barely get the words out. “What if you’re wrong?”

Hermann pulled him forward into an embrace. Newt pressed his tears into Hermann’s collar, swallowing a sob.

“I feel like I’m losing my mind...” Newt said into his jacket, “And I’d have no way of knowing it.”
“You’re not losing anything,” said Hermann, holding him tightly.

“What’s happening to me?” Newt said, muffled.

“You have insomnia,” Hermann said, voice just above Newt’s ear. “It’s a serious condition and you need to be properly treated. It isn’t supernatural. It isn’t a curse.”

“We should have gone to the island...” Newt said. “We should have gone. They did something.”

“We need to get away from here,” Hermann said. “I know I said there was nowhere to run, but anywhere—anywhere would be better than here. We should go.”

“They started something. Something is happening.”

“Someone started a fire. That’s all.”

“What if I did it?” Newt whispered. “What if I made the call? What if I summoned it?”

“You didn’t summon anything,” Hermann said. “There is no call to make.”

Newt squeezed his eyes shut, burying his face in Hermann’s jacket. He wished with an acute homesick longing for the stability of the rational ground—for the Newt of old, who watched horror movies as cultural curiosities, who collected ghost stories for work, who trusted his own eye and his own mind and didn't think twice about it. He clung to Hermann, once his good-natured challenger in the realm of the unknown, now the voice of a time gone by. That rationality was so far gone from his subjective experience now that he did not even see it as rationality. It was a story now, and Hermann was the storyteller. Not Newt. Newt was nothing.

He wished he could believe him. Believe that there was no truth to the myths, no destiny, no incantation, that nothing was coming for them. If Newt was barely clinging to reason, here reason was, embodied in a gawky, angry academic who lived in a haunted house. Who tore holes in every supernatural story he could find in search of a reassurance that proved, finally, nonexistent. Who, against all odds, cared about Newt, cared more than was believable or advisable. Newt tried to find relief in that. If Newt held on tight enough, in the yawning dark, maybe he could believe him about the rest.

Slowly, his breathing returned to normal. He exhaled and pulled back slowly, rubbing his eyes under his glasses. “Okay,” he said, “Okay, okay. It’s okay.” He fixed his glasses and opened his eyes. His heart dropped.

They were standing behind Hermann.

They were thin, tall, their faces as white as the belly of a shark, bodies black as nothing. Their eyes were dead lightbulbs. Their teeth arched above the sockets. There were several of them, a handful. The daylight did not seem to hit them but to pass them by, and there they stood in the hood of the wind, like they had stepped from his nightmares as easily as through a doorway.

“H—H—” Newt’s voice and motor control had deserted him. He tried to say, tried to say it, tried to grab Hermann for warning, for help—

“What is it? Newton—” Hermann’s voice contracted. “What’s wrong, what is it?”

The nearest one was stepping closer. Newt was gasping for air. It was smiling. He grasped at Hermann and no words were coming out.
It raised its arm, smiling.

It pointed at him.

Chapter End Notes

Acknowledgements & Notes:

- Biggest thanks to all my friends who unexpectedly started reading this while I worked on it. Instead of self-insert, this is a friend-insert story! Guest starring Sasha (Laurie Hall), Geena (Lucille Hall), Grubb (captain of the Lady of Shalott), Seal (Marion King), Laurel (Professor Emily Byrne), Manny (Dr. Belinda Wagner), myself (whistling Swan Boat driver), and of course my best beta and darling worst enemy Haley (Dr. Shao). Y’all are the best!
- This fic, and I, owe everything to CWR & Designations Congruent With Things. This has all actually been a DCWT fanfic, as you can probably tell, esp from the last chapter. CWR, if you’ve ever thought about coming out of retirement to confide your secrets to a younger writer please consider me as a candidate.
- Reference materials, IYI: The Forge of Christendom by Tom Holland; secondary characters in S1 named for physicists and mathematicians (after Newton), and abstract expressionists in S2 (after Gottlieb).
- Listen to the real Black Tapes, they’re much creepier when heard. I changed a LOT of the plot, so there’s still fun in store for you.
- Season 1 Soundtrack & Season 2 Soundtrack; official fic doodles here & here.
- Already working on another plot-heavy N/H AU so stay tuned! Come say hey on tumblr @davidfosterwallace2ndgromit

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!