

B&P

Books 'N Pieces Magazine

AUGUST 2024

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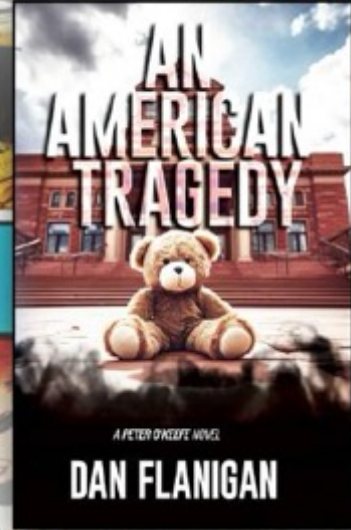
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Interview:
DAN FLANIGAN
a masterclass in
suspense and social
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AN INTERVIEW WITH DAN FLANIGAN



Dan Flanigan is a novelist, playwright, poet, and practicing lawyer. He holds a Ph.D. in History from Rice University and J.D. from the University of Houston. He taught Jurisprudence at the University of Houston and American Legal History at the University of Virginia. His first published book was his Ph.D. dissertation, [The Criminal Law of Slavery and Freedom, 1800-1868](#).

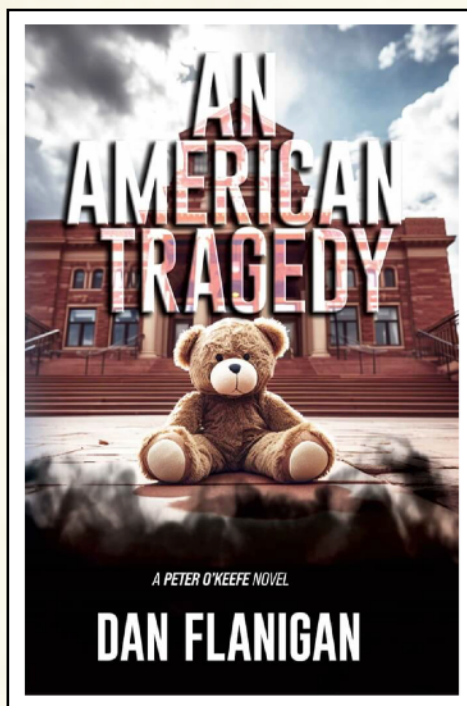
He moved on from academia to serve the civil rights cause as a school desegregation lawyer, followed by a long career as a finance attorney in private law practice. He became a name partner in the Polsinelli law firm in Kansas City, created its Financial Services practice, chaired its Real Estate & Financial Services Department for two decades, and established the firm's New York City office and served as its managing partner until October 2022.

Recently, he has been able to turn his attention to his lifelong ambition—creative writing. In 2019 he released a literary trifecta including [Mink Eyes](#), the first in the Peter O'Keefe series, [Dewdrops](#), a collection of shorter fiction, and [Tenebrae: A Memoir of Love and Death](#).

B&P: Why did you want to be a writer? You started young, then detoured, but what was the motivation?

DF: I can't remember precisely, but it was a high school English class when we begged our teacher to stop making us diagram sentences and let us read and discuss some books. Once that happened, I do remember obnoxiously resisting the whole

idea of a “theme” in a story. But I came around. And somehow, from nowhere really, it just seized me, a mild but still powerful “spiritual” sort of experience: I wanted to “be a writer.” I remember creeping up to our English teacher priest who was presiding over afternoon study hall and said, “Father, I wonder if I could be a writer?” He said, “I think you could because you’re such a good reader.” That was enough for me.



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as readers can attest). But then a close friend of mine, reading the O’Keefe books, said something like “O’Keefe sure sounds and acts a lot like Dan Flanigan. It’s like having you there on the page.” But I assure you that my life has not been nearly as exciting as O’Keefe’s or Harrigan’s.

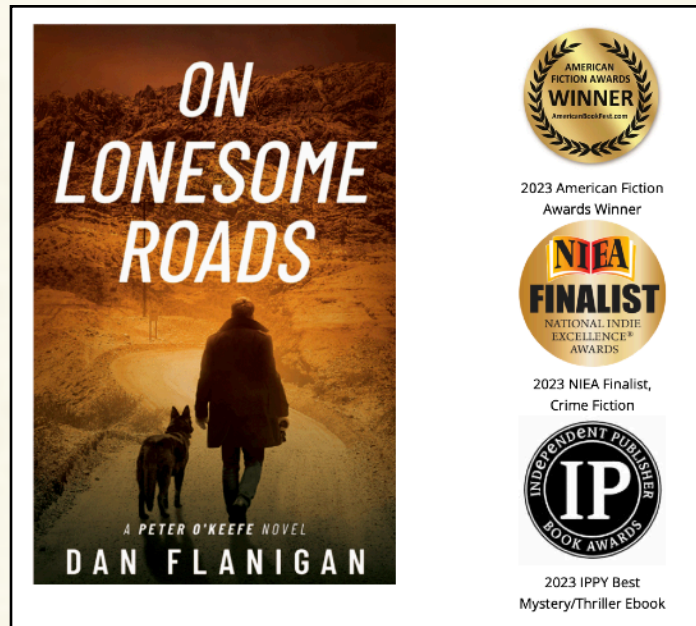
B&P: What was the worst part of publishing your first book? Any regrets?

DF: Putting it out there in the world and unsure it was worthy of it.

B&P: How much of you is in your characters and why do you find them compelling enough to write about?

DF: Not that much and a lot. I have deliberately tried not to put myself into my primary character in the series, Peter O’Keefe, and to help me avoid that, I have tried to put aspects of myself in secondary character Mike Harrigan, lawyer and O’Keefe’s childhood “blood brother” (not exactly self-flattering

B&P: Why do you find them compelling enough to write about?



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struggling hero they can bond with in a “sibling” or “best friend” sort of way. And I work hard on my so-called “secondary” characters, which at times have already and will in the future become primary, and those are also, I hope, “real world.”

B&P: What lessons have you learned from youth and what lessons from the first time you wrote before the detour, to now?

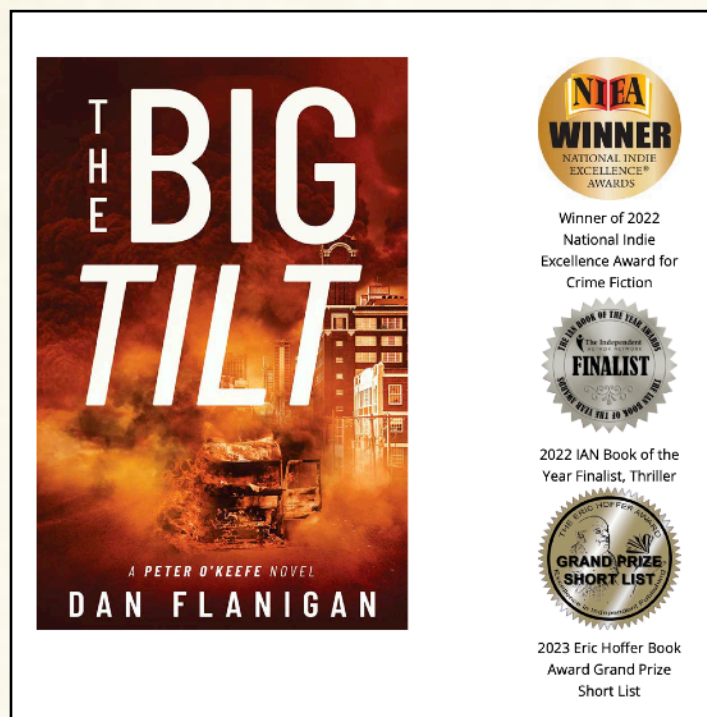
DF: After a burst of short stories and poems in high school, the “detour” happened. I don’t think I learned anything from that experience except the “be a writer” drive never left despite many decades of multiple detours.

From “youth,” I’m not sure I learned any “lessons” except from my parents how not to live. I came out of it with enough unhappiness and neuroses that I doubt I would “be a writer” without them and have become perversely grateful for them. All the “lessons” I’ve learned in life came from addiction and recovery (cursed, damned, and saved; sin and redemption; spiritual death and resurrection).

DF: O’Keefe is a guy who is failing, achieving, searching, sometimes finding, struggling with the same things many in my generation have done, so he is “real world” in that sense though he lives a more exciting life than most of us. But even the excitement aspect is “real world,” nothing that either hasn’t or couldn’t have happened in “real life.” I am trying to give the readers a complicated,

B&P: How do you handle bad reviews?

DF: Not well. Luckily, there have not been many negative ones. I have the



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thinnest of skins. My daughter reads all reviews with the request only to send me negative ones that say something that might be helpful. And I have been helped by at least a couple of reviews that constructively identified problems.

B&P: What's your writing process like?

DF: Best description I can come up with is “manic depressive.” I have always been disciplined in my legal work (though maybe the

right word is “obsessed,” thus eliminating the need for discipline) but not so much so with writing. I don’t write every day. I often don’t write for many days. I am best when I can create a three-day or four-day weekend and just give myself to it full immersion and not be in a hurry about it. At the same time, I am terrified to give up my “day job” entirely and be relegated to nothing but that empty screen every morning. But I find it interesting that after taking two years to write *An American Tragedy* (with many ups and downs and even abandonments of the project), I am moving along much better and more “disciplined” with the current book. I think some of that, though not all, is feeling time’s footsteps clomping louder and closer behind me. In all events, writer’s block is a constant issue for me. The best remedy I have found for it is to skip the scene(s) currently stifling me and move onto

something I know I can do. The more I get written down (and thus the greater investment in and commitment to the work as a whole), the easier it is to go back and fill in--and some of those once seemingly impossible scenes have turned out to be the best.

B&P: For those not familiar with it, please explain the Peter O'Keefe series and why a new reader should give it a try?

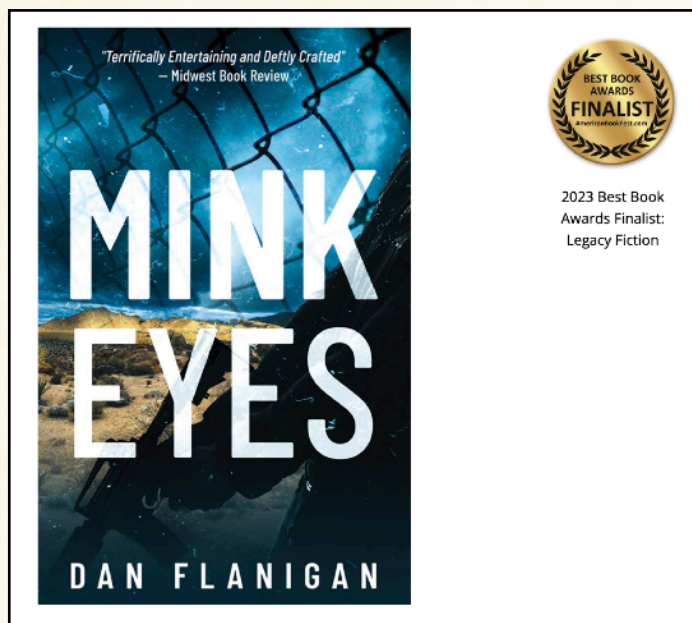
DF: Cribbing from the series description at the end of my most recent book, *An American Tragedy: How did we get here?* Dan Flanigan, after a long career as a finance, banking, and bankruptcy lawyer in which he was both a player in and witness to some of the dramatic transformations of our era, intends to provide at least a few of the answers to that question through a series of novels, recounting, from the 1980s to the present day, the life and adventures of his private detective hero Peter O'Keefe and the assorted characters in O'Keefe's orbit as they wade through some of the legendary scams, schemes, and scandals of our troubled times.

I think it is important to emphasize for potential readers what many reviewers have said: Each of the novels is stand-alone. If you pick up one of the later in the series, you can enjoy it without having read the earlier ones.

B&P: You write poetry? How did that come about and how much of a poet do you consider yourself to be?

DF: In my high school "burst," I wrote quite a bit of poetry but not much after that other than "in my head." I did through all the years read a lot of poetry and especially late in life immersed myself in Yeats among others. But when my wife died in 2011, I wanted to write something about her last illness and death (with flashes back of our 45 years together). I started out trying to do it in novel form, but it just didn't seem at all interesting. I found that poetry (both verse and prose)

let me condense things and hopefully make them much more powerful through the condensing and the rhythm and imagery of poetry. So I wrote *Tenebrae: A Memoir of Love and Death*. But even it was primarily a narrative (though there were a few



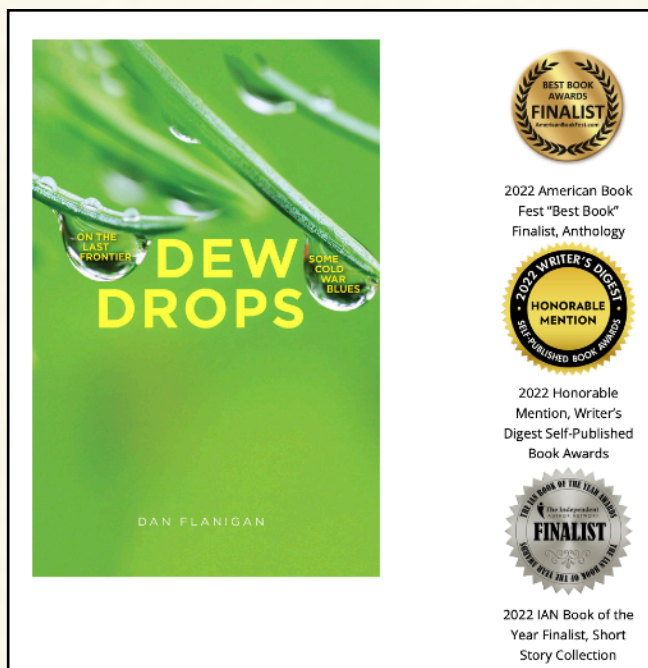
non-narrative poems in the collection). If I ever write poetry again, and I might, it will almost certainly be “narrative.” I don’t think my feelings and musings are interesting enough to express other than through characters acting in the world, i.e. “story.”

In addition to *Tenebrae*, I have published a book of short fiction titled *Dewdrops*.

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B&P: You were a civil rights lawyer before changing to finance and bankruptcy. How do you feel your lawyer side helps your writer side, if at all?

DF: As noted above, some of the main themes and plot lines of the O’Keefe series are the scams, schemes, and scandals of our times. My finance and bankruptcy career put me in the midst of many of these. For example, the mink farm situation in my first O’Keefe book, *Mink Eyes*, had its origins in a case I handled as a young lawyer (but without the “fun,” i.e. intrigue, sex, and violence). My civil rights career was brief and, ultimately, sad because in the school desegregation area where I was most involved, we were ultimately stymied by massive white resistance (active and sometimes violent in places like Boston, passive, i.e. move across the state line, in Kansas City) and Congressional



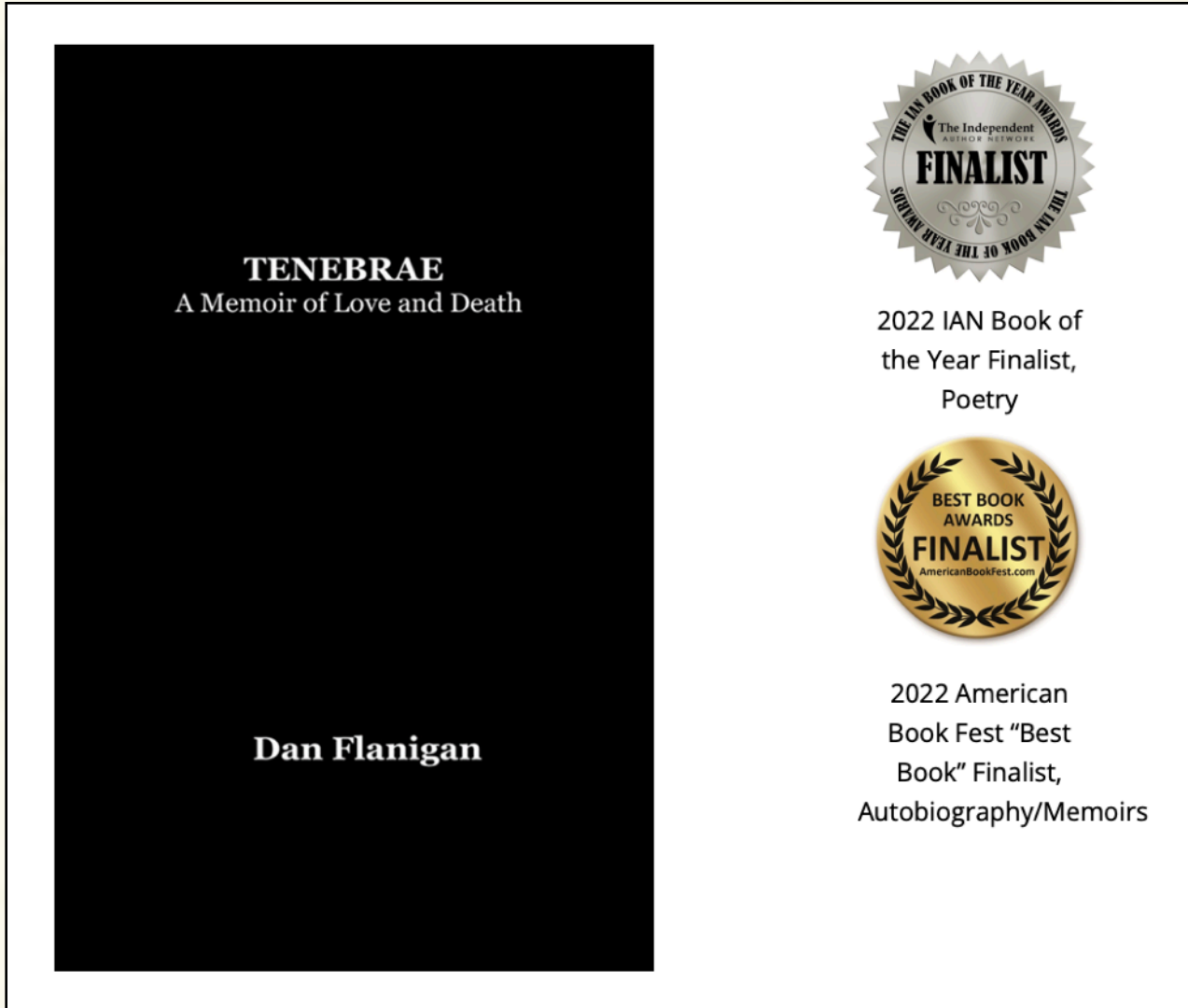
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legislation (the Byrd Amendment in 1976, which prohibited the federal Department of Health, Education from cutting off funds to school districts that refused to bus their children for purposes of desegregation and that forbade the use of federal money to pay for busing of children beyond the school nearest their homes).

Most of all, it left me (which may be reflected in some of my writing) with the sense of the failed promise of the 60s and the civil rights movement (at least its school desegregation initiatives) and the thwarted initiatives of LBJ's Great Society. Defeated, exhausted, or just without sufficient gumption and staying power, we set about becoming Yuppies instead.

B&P: You and your late wife, Candy Gambrell, founded Sierra Tucson, the alcohol/drug treatment center. What was the impetus for that, and how does that affect your writing style and character analysis?

DF: It grew out of my own addiction and treatment experience and my desperate gambit to successfully recover. I disliked everything about my life—my town, my profession, my marriage--and I felt I had to try something else, something better for the world, or I would slip back into alcoholic hell. So, I put it all on the line. It turned out that Candy was more than up to the challenge (I had been misjudging her all our lives together), and we did it. But we couldn't keep it because we didn't have enough capital to get beyond the initial startup operating



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losses and had to sell it, but it was the experience itself that was crucial. And, incidentally, I enjoyed a burst of writing during that period that, despite an additional long “detour” thereafter, established the foundations for the literary work I have been able to accomplish in the last ten years. Ironically, I ended up not only in the same marriage but back in the same town and profession—but a different man (though still with many faults). That, to paraphrase Robert Frost, made all the difference.

B&P: What's next for Dan, the author and poet?

DF: I am working on the fifth O'Keefe book. I am surprised I have become so committed to this O'Keefe series. I am an accidental crime writer. I wrote *Mink Eyes* as a detective story to make more interesting what I envisioned originally as a purely "literary" novel. But the series gives me opportunities, which I hope I am somewhat capitalizing on, to write "literary" but pulse-quickening meditations on some of the things that have made us who we are (and aren't), create a large gallery of characters and observe/develop them over time, some over a long period of time, in the crucible of dramatic societal changes and exterior and interior challenges and crises. I may write something else someday, but have no specific plans to do so.

We thank Dan for his time answering our many questions. Click on the book covers in this interview to learn more or buy the books.

You can find him online on one of his many social media platforms.

Website: <https://danflaniganbooks.com/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/AuthorDanFlanigan>

Twitter: https://twitter.com/_DanFlanigan

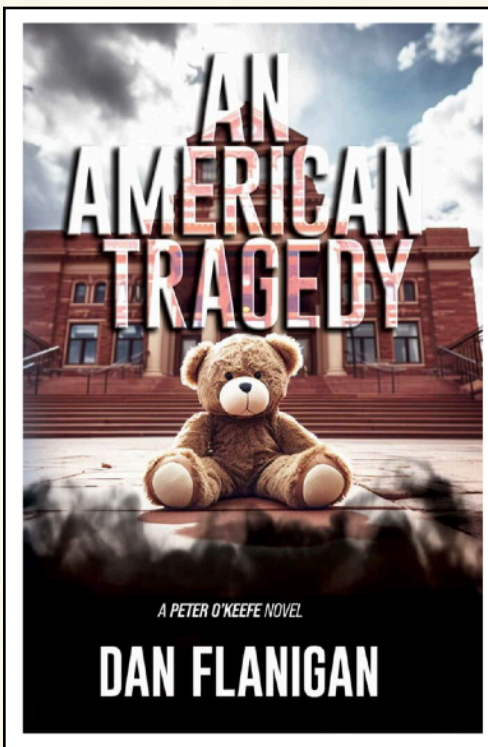


Watch Dan Flanigan on *Writers on Writers* <https://www.youtube.com/live/zQp40zUfOuY?si=sOK7Jl1dX6PjF9dv>

BOOKS 2 READ SAMPLER

An American Tragedy by Dan Flanigan

CHAPTER 21



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FOR HIS FIRST visit to the site, O’Keefe wanted to be alone. No distractions. He told Hartley to hold off on the photographer until next time.

“All by your lonesome, huh?” Hartley said. “Spooky.”
“No worries now that Bitson’s cleansed the place.”

He hadn’t visited the building for years, not since the last time he’d been the one to pick Kelly up at the end of the day, which he’d done only rarely, in part because he couldn’t always be depended on to arrive on time—or sometimes at all. Annie and he had still been married then, though they seemed to have taken up permanent residence on the bitter cusp of imminent divorce. They’d never seemed particularly “made for each other.” Just the opposite. But in

truth, it had been mostly his fault: the drugs, the drink, and the idiotic idea—one he’d not been fully conscious of at the time—that if a marriage wasn’t near-perfect, it wasn’t worth preserving.

He had obtained and studied the building plans. Typical of its era, it was brick, two stories, plus a semi-finished basement. Double entry doors opened into an abbreviated foyer where another set of double doors led to the building proper, a long hallway with four classrooms, two on each side. At the end of the corridor, a staircase led up to a second floor with administrative offices and a teacher's lounge. In the basement was an unfinished room, now infamous, containing the boiler and other utilities over which Marvin Smith had presided. Across the hallway was the also now-infamous large multi-purpose room used for naps, art, music, and special programs and gatherings.

A security guard greeted him. It would be ironic, O'Keefe thought, if the guard refused him entrance and turned out to be one of George's people, his own employee. But the guard was not his employee and did let him in. They'd turned enough lights on for him to see but not to see well. He wondered how his photos would come out and made a mental note to request proper lighting when the photographer came on-site.

Ginny's classroom was the first one on the left. He switched on the lights. Nothing noticeably different from the last time he'd seen it six years earlier. A bit scuffed up and shabbier than the fanatical festive spic-and-span orderliness of Betsy Mortimer's Children's Clinic, but far more comforting ... the miniature desks, the clutter of toys, the crude drawings pinned haphazardly to the walls, the goofy uplifting slogans on banners and blackboard. Here is the Eden from which we fall.

He'd forgotten about the window in the doorway, though not the four windows spaced evenly along the opposite wall. Those looked onto the parking lot, where parents and others came and went throughout the day, and onto the adjacent building used by the church for administrative offices and various parish support functions and meeting areas.

The church people had initially denied vehemently that such abuses would be possible given the busyness of the area, all the comings and goings, and insisted they'd never witnessed anything remotely suspicious, nor heard one complaint of any kind of abuse in all the years the school had operated.

That was before some of the parents announced their intention to sue the church as well as the school. After that, it had been “no comment.”

Between the two classrooms were restrooms, the boys' on one side of the hallway, the girls' on the other. Crimes were alleged to have occurred in both. Some of the children were barely toilet-trained when they started at the school. Others occasionally had accidents or just needed help. Money for teachers' aides was scarce and volunteers sparse. If kids needed help, their teacher might ask a colleague across the hall to take an occasional look into her classroom while she accompanied the student to the bathroom. The female teachers—and they never seemed to be male—had to help the boys as well as the girls. The bathrooms were alike except for urinals in the boys' and two additional stalls in the girls'. There were windows, but they were frosted. Both rooms had stalls. Unfortunate, O'Keefe thought. While it was difficult to believe that the alleged abuses could have occurred without detection given the number of windows and doors and fairly constant and unpredictable traffic in this environment, the partitioned toilet areas allowed for concealment. The prosecution had already picked up on that theme, and the children's stories had begun to emphasize it.

But the real problem for the defense was the basement, where most of the alleged horrific events had occurred. Sliding his hand along the banister, O'Keefe felt his way down the steps, wondering if they'd deliberately left the basement lights off. As he felt along the wall for a light switch, he noticed the clicking, whirring, and bumping sounds that since childhood had made him anxious when he found himself alone in dark places. He felt the light switch, flipped it, and

tensed, anticipating a revelation of something in the hallway to be afraid of. Of course there was nothing. The hallway just looked old, bruised, defeated.

He found the multi-purpose room. Kelly's graduation ceremony had taken place there. She'd been five then, and blushing proud of her achievement, even if not quite sure exactly what she'd achieved other than a vague but somehow special marker of progress toward the cherished goal of "growing up." In the boisterously decorated room, each set of parents had received a hand-decorated program made by their child. Annie still probably had theirs stored away somewhere.

Now, in this quite different present, he noticed the complete absence of windows. No lock on the door either. Marvin Smith could easily have come in, but so could others—teachers, administrative staff, parents. Surely the other teachers and administrative people would travel back and forth to the room at will and unannounced, and maybe the parents too, when picking up their children.

Marie Dreyer, the school's principal, had greeted the abuse allegations with contempt, and had been vociferous about it, using words and phrases like "insane" and "hysterical idiocy" and "witchhunt." The authorities had responded by promptly opening an investigation of Marie Dreyer. Not long after, a couple of children identified her as an occasional witness to the abuse, and it was rumored that she might even have been an active participant.

"That didn't silence her," Hartley had said, "but it sent everyone else involved with the school rushing for cover. None of the other staff had supported the accusations against Virginia and Marvin, but they aren't saying anything publicly in their favor either." O'Keefe intended to try to interview them but couldn't force them unless Judge Snyder could be persuaded to order depositions, which was unlikely. It was enough to hope that during the remaining proceedings Snyder wouldn't maintain the unmistakable initial hostility to the defense he'd shown at the preliminary hearings. Certainly he'd do nothing special for them, nothing out

of the ordinary that would allow the parents and the media to paint him as a black-robed abettor of the depraved.

At the back of the larger room, behind a wall extending the width of a room, there was a nook with hooks in its walls that had served as a cloak room. There was no door, just openings at both ends. Vile things were said to have occurred here. If any of it were true, the evildoers must have been seized with a desperate, insane courage to take the risk, so easy would it have been for someone to come through the unlocked main door and through to the nook and behold the shocking scene. Ginny seemed the opposite of a risk-taker.

He crossed the hallway to the boiler room and opened the door. The door was a little too large for the doorway, and the floor squeaked, as if in pain, as the door dragged across it. Since the place had been untended for weeks, the spiders had wasted no time asserting their dominion. But aside from the webs and the crumbly stuccoed walls and ceiling, the place was surprisingly clean and Mr. Smith's nook tidy.

On his worktable were a couple of pencils and a small, crumpled notebook with writing on it that appeared to be a to-do list. There was a cot, a dark-gray pillow, a thin mattress covered by a sheet, and a soft, thin blanket. Very comfy. Dainty, even — disturbingly so. He wondered what that might mean, and whatever it really meant, how the prosecution might spin it.

On his way out, he spotted a padlock latch at eye level on the inside of the door. Why would anyone want to lock the door to a boiler room from the inside? Had this been installed at the time the building was constructed, probably in the 1930s at the latest? It didn't look that old. If Marvin Smith had installed it, that could be a problem. Hartley would need to ask Marie Dreyer about that.

He climbed back to the main floor. At the far end of the hallway toward the entrance, the security guard was shifting from one foot to another, broadcasting an air of hostile impatience.

“Almost done,” O’Keefe called out. “Just need to do the second floor.”

He waited for the guard to say something, which didn’t happen. O’Keefe mumbled, “Okay,” and headed up the stairs, pretty sure he’d find nothing of interest since there’d been no mention of anything untoward occurring on that floor.

The man navigated his van through the streets adjacent to the St. Stephen’s complex. It was now a mostly commercial zone, older buildings of the same vintage as the Operation Go! structure, most of the businesses closed on this Sunday afternoon. Only a single bedraggled block of houses and a shabby two-story brick apartment building indicated that the area had once been residential, and those stragglers looked like they were only barely managing to hold on for dear life against the commercial onslaught. But the whole area had so deteriorated that they now risked little danger of anyone even bothering to want to tear them down. Which worked for him just fine. It was unlikely that some resident would notice him circling and report a suspicious vehicle to the police. The people who lived here were the type likely to still be snoring in bed, even on a Sunday afternoon, and even if awake, they probably wouldn’t care enough to call anyway.

He found three available spots around the St. Stephen’s quadrangle where he could position his van inconspicuously and still be able to observe the Operation Go! building entrance and the Jeep Grand Wagoneer parked in the lot. To minimize the risk of attracting unwanted attention, he could stay for a while in each place, then move to another. But even if someone challenged him, he’d simply explain that he often came here to observe this horrible place where his son and the other children had been violated. It was part of his grieving process, approved and even encouraged by his therapist.

He'd used only two of his observation posts when the man exited the building, walked around to the side and into the parking lot, checked out each of the windows of the witch's classroom and took photos. He understood the man to be Peter O'Keefe, a private detective hired by the witch's lawyer to assist her in thwarting justice. He'd begun following O'Keefe, thinking that the PI might be doing the same to him and other parents of the violated children, sneaking sinisterly around, maybe even stalking the children themselves. Would he be trying to dig up dirt on the families? Maybe do even worse?

No way was that going to happen. He would turn the tables. He'd already visited O'Keefe's office, taken the elevator to the man's floor, walked up and down the hallway, ready, if challenged, with a story about looking for a business that was apparently no longer a tenant.

But this was the first time he'd observed the detective in the flesh for more than a few seconds. Taller than the average man, above six feet for sure, slim, dark hair worn a bit longer than most people were wearing it these days, short-sleeved polo-type pink shirt, jeans, loafers, no socks.

As he watched O'Keefe climb into the Wagoneer, Ralph's revulsion, turning physical, rose in his gorge.

Keeping what he calculated was a safe distance, he pursued. Ralph congratulated himself. He was getting good at this.

Our thanks to Dan for supplying us with this sampler.

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