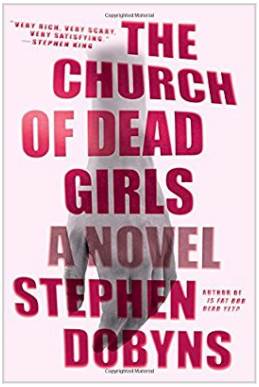


# The Church of Dead Girls: A Novel

*By Stephen Dobyns*



**The Church of Dead Girls: A Novel** By Stephen Dobyns

One by one, three young girls vanish in a small town in upstate New York. With the first disappearance, the townspeople begin to mistrust outsiders. When the second girl goes missing, neighbors and childhood friends start to eye each other warily. And with the third disappearance, the sleepy little town awakens to a full-blown nightmare. *The Church of Dead Girls* is a novel that displays Stephen Dobyns' remarkable gifts for exploring human nature, probing the ruinous effects of suspicion. As panic mounts and citizens take the law into their own hands, no one is immune, and old rumors, old angers, and old hungers come to the surface to reveal the secret history of a seemingly genteel town and the dark impulses of its inhabitants.

# The Church of Dead Girls: A Novel

*By Stephen Dobyns*

**The Church of Dead Girls: A Novel** By Stephen Dobyns

One by one, three young girls vanish in a small town in upstate New York. With the first disappearance, the townspeople begin to mistrust outsiders. When the second girl goes missing, neighbors and childhood friends start to eye each other warily. And with the third disappearance, the sleepy little town awakens to a full-blown nightmare. *The Church of Dead Girls* is a novel that displays  Stephen Dobyns' remarkable gifts for exploring human nature, probing the ruinous effects of suspicion. As panic mounts and citizens take the law into their own hands, no one is immune, and old rumors, old angers, and old hungers come to the surface to reveal the secret history of a seemingly genteel town and the dark impulses of its inhabitants.

**The Church of Dead Girls: A Novel By Stephen Dobyns Bibliography**

- Sales Rank: #121224 in Books
- Published on: 2015-08-04
- Released on: 2015-08-04
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 7.97" h x 1.24" w x 5.28" l,
- Binding: Paperback
- 464 pages

## Editorial Review

Review
“Long after most other tales of murder and insanity have panted to their foregone conclusions, the suspense in this tale continues to build. *The Church of Dead Girls* is a meditation on hysteria, immensely ambitious, but Dobyns tells the tale with thte calm—and the fearful inevitability—of a man walking down a long hotel corridor to a room where some awful thing is waiting. Best of all? He never pulls up or turns aside—I kept reading, riveted by the plot and rooting with all my heart for Dobyns to pull it off. And he did, in a terrifying climax. I don’t expect to read a more frightening novel this year. Very rich, very scary, very satisfying.” –Stephen King

“A complex parable of social disintegration…Dobyns’sad a disquieting novel carries a contemporary moral, true in even the smallest American towns.” *–The New York Times Book Review*

“A chilling evocation of small-town life turned upside down. Dobyns delivers the goods.” *–San Francisco Chronicle*

"*The Church of Dead Girls* is that rare thing--a genuine thriller that transcends its genre. You'll read it with equal parts curiosity, dread, and wonder." --Richard Russo

"Edgy tension and considerable suspense… This could be any small town, and that truth is perhaps the most frightening thought of all."--*The Washington Post Book World*

"The creepiness mounts with Hitchcockian intensity… The bloody conclusion is worth the wait."--*The Chicago Tribune*

"Dobyns has that rare ability, found in only the most accomplished of storytellers, to reveal the mystery--the payoff--that the reader has been turning the pages to discover, but to do so without dispelling the sense of greater mystery which is the condition of the human heart." --Stuart Dybek

“Tantalizingly sinister...Dobyns hooks us from the very first sentence." --*People*

"Dobyns is a master storyteller with a superb sense of our culture's postures and foibles. He can terrify and delight all at once. This is a page-turner." --Mary Karr

"Dobyns delivers all the satisfactions of a good thriller writer… but he also captures something beyond the reach of most genre novelists: a sense of life on the page…. Every summer, readers look for a novel that will keep them turning the pages without insulting their intelligence. It's unlikely there will be a better novel this season than *The Church of Dead Girls.*" --*New York Daily News*

“In its Gothic evocation of small-town life and mob hysteria, it often suggests the influence of Sherwood Anderson and Shirley Jackson, and Dobyns knows his upstate New York setting as well as Frederick Busch and Joyce Carol Oates.” *–The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

“A brisk dip into the ice-cold waters of schizophrenia, nymphomania, and serial murder… A vivid and deeply scary tale” *–Kirkus*

“Dobyns reveals the dark impulses and tangled relationships that lie underneath…. An unusually thoughtful psychological thriller.” –*Booklist*

About the Author

**Stephen Dobyns** is the author of more than thirty novels and poetry collections, including *Cold Dog Soup*, *Cemetery Nights*, and *The Burn Palace*. Among his many honors are a Melville Cane Award, Pushcart Prizes, a National Poetry Series prize, and three National Endowment for the Arts fellowships. His novels have been translated into twenty languages, and his poetry has appeared in the *Best American Poems* anthology. Dobyns teaches creative writing at Warren Wilson College and has taught at the University of Iowa, Sarah Lawrence College, and Syracuse University.



Prologue

This is how they looked: three dead girls propped up in three straight chairs. The fourteen-year-old sat in the middle. She was taller than the others by half a head. The two thirteen-year-olds sat on either side of her. Across the chest of each girl was an X of rope leading over her shoulders, down around her waist, and fastened in the back. All three girls were barefoot and their ankles were tied to the legs of their chairs. Even so, the ropes were loose, as if to hold their bodies erect rather than to keep their living selves prisoner: meaning they had been tied after they were dead.

I didn’t witness this. I only looked at the photographs my cousin showed me. There were many photographs. And he said the police had a videotape of the entire attic, but I never saw it.

Perhaps the chairs were two feet from one another. Because of the dryness of the attic, the girls looked old. They didn’t look like teenagers anymore. They were gaunt and bony and resembled women in their seventies. A large air conditioner and dehumidifier had been kept running all day long, day after day, and the moisture had been sucked from their bodies. They were dried out and their skin looked like dark wrinkled paper. But they were not equally dried out because they had been killed at different times, so the girl killed most recently looked youngest. The girls’ heads were tilted back or to the side. The one in the middle had blond hair. Long strands hung across her face. The others had brown hair. All three had hair down to the middle of their backs and perhaps this meant something. It gave them a virginal appearance. Although now, looking so old, they appeared nunlike, spinsterish. And by the time the photographs were taken their hair had become dusty. And they were emaciated, at least two of them were, as if they hadn’t been fed. But perhaps this was an effect of the dryness. All the vibrancy had been leached from their skin. The hollows of their cheeks were startling indentations. Their gums had receded from their teeth.

What were they wearing? Not their original clothes. Those had been taken from them. They wore handmade gowns cut from thick velvet. The middle girl’s was dark green, with long sleeves and a hem that nearly reached her ankles. The girl on the right wore a gown of dark red, the one on the left a gown of blue. But to speak of the colors is to say nothing. Sewn to the dresses, pinned to them, even glued to them, were stars and moons and suns cut from white or yellow sparkling cloth. But also animals, or rather their silhouettes: dogs and bears, horses and fish, hawks and doves. And there were numbers that seemed random—5s, 7s, 4s—the glittery numbers one buys at the hardware store to stick on mailboxes. There seemed no pattern to them. And pieces of jewelry, cheap costume jewelry, were pinned to the velvet and were draped over the numbers and stars and animals: bracelets and necklaces and earrings. It took a moment to see the actual color of the dresses because they were so covered with numbers and jewelry and patches of fabric.

Did I mention the words? Some of the patches had words written on them, but not words that made sense,

“CK” and “NT” and “TCH” and “FIL.” Fragments of words, the beginnings and ends of words. What could they have meant to anyone? Also attached to the cloth were brass bells and little mirrors, pieces of metal and multicolored glass balls.

Presumably this clutter of patches and jewelry, words and numbers had been affixed to the dresses after the girls were wearing them and once they were tied to their chairs, because there were none behind their backs or under their bony buttocks. One understood that the girls had been placed in the chairs and decorated after they were dead. And such a labor must have taken days because nothing was helter-skelter.

What of the chairs themselves? They were straight-backed, but they hadn’t been bought anyplace. They were amateurishly made, knocked together from two-by-fours, and they leaned crookedly. But one didn’t notice they had been built from two-by-fours right away because nearly every inch of their surfaces was covered with the shiny tops of tin cans or round red reflectors or the bottoms of glass bottles, green and yellow and clear and brown. Most were nailed down but the circles of glass were held in place by bent nails tacked around their edges.

The chairs shone and glittered and—how shall I say this?—they seemed to stare back at the viewer. They were not stationary. Their color and shininess made them active, even aggressive. The legs of the chairs were wrapped in tinfoil and the metal circles and glass and reflectors were stuck on top of the foil. But again one realized it had been done after the girls were already seated, because where they were leaning or where they touched the seats the wood was bare.

And the attic? It was a large room with a pitched ceiling. At its highest it was perhaps twelve feet, but it sloped down to two feet on either side. The room was about thirty-five by fifty feet, with a curtained window at either end. The air conditioner had been fixed into a skylight in the middle and near the peak of the roof. But I never saw the whole thing; I only saw it from different angles by combining the photographs. Between the studs were strips of insulation with shiny foil backing, so the whole room sparkled and must have seemed absolutely alive in the light from the candles. Hundreds of strips of tinsel also hung from the ceiling. Perhaps they moved slightly in the drafts from the air conditioner. And how they must have sparkled.

Because that was the other thing: the candles. Many were stubs but the stubs had been replaced and replaced again, so that whoever lit them had come to the attic and lit them many times. In the photographs the candles were not burning. One had to imagine them, to imagine their reflections in the insulation’s tinfoil backing, their flickering in the glass and red reflectors and metal discs adorning the chairs, their twinkling in the cheap costume jewelry pinned to the girls’ dresses. How busy the attic must have been in the light of these candles and each candle reflected hundreds of times. The walls, chairs, clothing: a conversation of light, an ecclesiastical shimmering. And how the faces of the three girls must have glittered. The combination of light and shadow must have made their faces quicken, as if the girls weren’t dead, as if they had never been dead.

But all this must be imagined. I know for a fact that the authorities never lit the candles. They simply took their photographs, removed the bodies, and dismantled the whole spectacle. I don’t know if it is being stored someplace or if it was destroyed. One can imagine the unscrupulous trying to steal it, planning to put those flashing chairs on display for others to pay money to see. Perhaps they would put mannequins in the chairs and dress them as the girls had been dressed. The Church of Dead Girls it might be called, or the Monster’s Den.

Because surely the person who killed the girls was a monster. But hadn’t this person lived among us? Our town is not large. This person came and went, conducted business, had acquaintances, even close friends. Nobody looked at this person and thought, Monster. Perhaps this was the most disturbing aspect of the business: that the person, on the surface at least, never seemed extraordinary, or none of us had the wit to

identify the signs. What would those signs have been? Wouldn't evil or monstrosity call attention to itself? And yet this person had a place within the community. How do you think it made us feel about one another, even afterward, when the discoveries were made? If one of us who had such an awful secret seemed innocent, then what about the others? What were their secrets? And were they looking at me as well? Of course they were.

Three dead girls in three straight chairs, collapsed against the ropes, heads tilted, their skin papery, their bare feet on the wood floor looking more like paws than feet, brown and bony. Their mouths were slightly open and their lips pulled back. One could see their small teeth, imagine the dark dryness of their tongues, the darkness of their silent throats. How their teeth must have glittered in the candlelight. And their eyes, half open as if the girls were drowsing, they too must have shone.

But there is something else. Their left hands were missing. Each girl had her left hand severed at the wrist. One could see their wrist bones. And those stubs, they must have glittered as well. In the photographs, there was a startling milkiness to these wrist bones. The skin and flesh had receded, shrunk back, letting the wrist bones jut from the stumps. Their whiteness and roundness made me think of eyes, blind eyes, because, of course, how could these white bones ever see?

And the missing hands? They weren't in the attic, nor were they in the house.

# Part One

## One

Afterward everyone said it began with the disappearance of the first girl, but it began earlier than that. There are always incidents that precede an outrage and that seem unconnected or otherwise innocent, a whole web of incidents, each imperceptibly connected to the next. Take the case of a man who cuts his throat. Isn't it a fact that the medical examiner finds several practice nicks, as if the deceased were trying to discover how much it might hurt? And in the case of our town, even before the first girl's disappearance, there were undoubtedly several events comparable to two or three nicks on the skin above the jugular.

For example, on a Tuesday morning in early September, just after school began, a bomb was found on a window ledge outside a seventh grade classroom of the Albert Knox Consolidated School. It appeared to be three sticks of dynamite wrapped together with silver tape. Two green wires descended from the dynamite to a paper bag resting on the grass. A student pointed it out to the English teacher, Mrs. Hicks, and she rang the alarm. We get bomb scares sometimes; all schools do. They are malicious pranks and no bomb is ever found. Mostly when school is closed during the day because of a bomb scare there is a party atmosphere. No one believes in the threat and you can hear the students laughing and chatting as they hurry from the building.

But on this day in early September news of an actual bomb spread quickly. Students were frightened. Sarah Phelps, an eighth grader, was knocked down on the stairs as she ran from the building. Other students were bruised as well. There was no orderliness in our departure. The officious teachers like Lou Hendricks and Sandra Petoski stood at the head of their students and kept control. But others weren't as capable and in some classrooms—Mrs. Hicks's, for example—there was panic. Mrs. Hicks is a nervous, excitable woman and she must have felt that she had at last found something to be sincerely excited about.

The building was closed and everyone hurried out to the parking lot. I guided a few of my own biology

students, tenth graders, but most of my charges had disappeared. Harry Martini, our principal, had gone to see the bomb and came running back. He wore a white short-sleeved shirt with large half-moon sweat marks discoloring the fabric beneath his armpits. Harry is rather stout and running takes effort. He made us move to the far end of the parking lot and onto the playing fields, where the ground was muddy. We have six hundred students and we made quite a crowd. Luckily it wasn't raining.

Ryan Tavich, who had recently been made lieutenant, was the first of the town police to arrive, quickly followed by three squad cars. Ryan took charge. He was in plainclothes—a gray suit, as I remember—with a tweed cap balanced on the back of his head. The police set up a barrier. Then we settled down to wait for the state police bomb squad to arrive from the barracks in Potterville. The students milled around. When it became obvious that school would be closed for the day, some students with cars drove off and a few others went with them. But most chose to remain, to see if there would truly be an explosion.

That morning I watched events through my own good-humored ignorance. No girls had disappeared. The town had a certain wholeness and the mayor could speak of a sense of community. Now I look at that same scene through the filter of other events and I see fragility where I had imagined resilience, the fleeting where I'd seen permanence. It was a warm morning and only a few maples had begun to turn. Crows called from the oaks beyond the baseball diamond. The sky was that deep blue one gets in the early fall with two or three small clouds scudding across it. The school was situated at the northern edge of town, and over the trees I could see the steeple of Saint Mary's and part of the red roof of the four-story Weber Building, our biggest building. A golden retriever had appeared from one of the nearby houses and it rushed from one group of students to another, pausing only long enough to have its ears scratched or to be thumped on the back.

I see them standing together. Meg Shiller with her long brown hair talking to shy Bobby Lucas, whom I had recruited for the chess club. Bonnie McBride with her usual stack of books, Hillary Debois carrying her violin case. Sharon Malloy running her fingers through her blond hair again and again. There must have been students whose names I didn't know, but it felt like I knew them all. In some cases, I had been a classmate of their parents. A few boys began tossing a football. Two others had a Frisbee. Teachers looked at them impatiently, as if to say that we weren't there to have fun.

The students are better dressed in September: new clothes, new shoes, new haircuts. In September, even the teachers feel hopeful. Harry Martini paced back and forth between the students and the town police, forming his own barrier. I'm afraid I have never liked him, and he walked splayfooted like an old mother goose, heaving his stout belly after the movement of his legs. The teachers themselves reminded me of mother hens. It was not the first time that such comparisons occurred to me.

It took thirty minutes for the state police bomb squad to arrive and by then the school buses had come to take most of the students home. Many wanted to stay but Harry Martini wouldn't allow it. The thing on the window ledge looked quite formidable and there was no telling how much damage it might cause. The school was a two-story building of yellow brick, built in the mid-1950s, and one imagined the bricks flying through the air like shrapnel. And of course Harry was terrified of doing something that would get him in trouble with the school board.

I myself decided to stay to see what would happen, though Harry gave me a look. From where I stood at the edge of the police line, the bomb was a silver shape against the window. About twenty other teachers remained as well and some people had driven out from town. Franklin Moore had come from the *Independent* and he interviewed Ryan Tavich. The two were close friends, played basketball on Thursday evenings in the high school gym, and often were together on weekends. Both looked very serious. Ryan kept taking off his cap and pushing back his short black hair. Franklin was tall, thin, and in his midthirties. He also interviewed Mrs. Hicks, who kept saying, "We're lucky we weren't killed." She said it with a different

emphasis a dozen times, as if practicing to get it right.

Franklin's daughter, Sadie, had been a student in my seventh grade science class, a pretty brown-haired, long-legged girl who carried herself like a dancer. By the time her father arrived, she had gone home on the bus. Her mother died of breast cancer two years ago and I assume Sadie went home to an empty house, as did many of the students with working parents. Within a month, children wouldn't be allowed to be home by themselves.

From the way the state police captain behaved, I expected the bomb to explode momentarily. The police moved their barriers even farther across the parking lot, pushing all of us onto the playing fields. Though Ryan Tavich was nominally in charge, the state police captain took over immediately. I didn't hear what they said, but the captain's facial expression was severe, as if Ryan had done something wrong, which of course he hadn't.

Cars were driven around to the rear of the school so they wouldn't be damaged in an explosion. Two of the bomb squad men wore padded suits with silver helmets that made them look like spacemen. With binoculars they studied the bomb and paper bag for quite some time, then they approached with infinite care, carrying what looked to be a large white garbage can.

We held our breaths. Really, most of us expected to see those white-suited men blown to smithereens. One of the men moved forward, slowly craning his head to peer inside the bag. He paused, looked down, then waved impatiently to his partner, who hurried over and looked in the bag as well. Even dressed as they were, I could sense their relief. Inside was a brick with the wires wrapped around it. It could never have exploded. Still, the men took great care in putting the dynamite, or what appeared to be dynamite, inside the white garbage can. Then they put the garbage can in a white panel truck and drove away.

The police began to dismantle their barriers. Franklin Moore interviewed the state police captain. Later we learned that although the bomb contained dynamite it lacked a detonator. It had only been put on the window ledge to scare people. That same afternoon, Phil Schmidt, our police chief, admitted it was the second bomb to be found. One had been placed a few days earlier at Pickering Elementary School. This was a disturbing discovery and it brought our town a certain attention. TV crews visited from Syracuse and Utica. Everyone wondered where the next bomb would turn up. The state police kept an extra trooper in town twenty-four hours a day and the police department took on another patrolman.

There was much speculation as to who had placed the bombs. Had it been a single person or a group? Was it a prank or had there been a more complicated idea behind it? For instance, members of the Ebenezer Baptist Church had been quite vocal about reestablishment of prayer in the schools. I heard people wonder out loud whether someone in the church's congregation had finally gone around the bend and issued a warning, as it were. One heard many such theories. An angry parent? A teacher or staff member who had been fired? Such theories were more harmful than the bombs themselves. They created a finger of suspicion that could be directed at anyone, depending on events. And that was no small thing, considering what events would soon occur.

—

Our village, Aurelius, has a population of seven thousand, down from nine thousand at the turn of the century. The town was incorporated in 1798 with land granted to soldiers after the Revolutionary War. The county seat, Potterville, is ten miles to the south. Utica, forty miles to the northwest, is the nearest big city. Before the Erie Canal was built, Aurelius was just south of the main highway going west, and until the Greek Revival period it was known as Loomis Corners. Then the new name was adopted in 1843. We still have many good examples of Greek Revival architecture, large white houses with white columns. But once traffic

began on the canal, Aurelius never got any bigger, while the towns along the canal grew and grew. Some people saw that as a bad thing, some as a good thing.

Afterward the changes were small. A Civil War monument was erected in front of City Hall: a tall column with a bronze soldier holding a musket. A train station was built, lasted a hundred years, went through a decline, and was reborn as a pizza parlor. The elms were cut down, leaving Main Street rather bare. Aurelius College, which began as a girls' finishing school, became a girls' junior college in the 1920s, a girls' four-year college in the 1950s, then went coed in the 1970s. It has five hundred students. There's a good equestrian program and a few graduates go directly to the veterinary school at Cornell.

A strip mall was built at the edge of town with an Ames, a Wegmans supermarket, a Napa auto supply store, and a Fays Drugs. Perhaps a hundred people work in Utica and commute. Others work in Potterville or for the pharmaceutical company in Norwich. There's a rope factory at the edge of town and a small electrical company belonging to General Electric. Many farmers grow cabbage for sauerkraut, which is processed in Potterville. A Sauerkraut Queen is chosen each fall. We have a small hospital and a movie theater called the Strand. We now have three video stores.

The library is adequate and can get books from the larger library in Potterville or even farther away. We have two car dealerships: Jack Morris Ford and Central Valley Chevy. The Ford dealership also sells VWs. The Chevy dealership also sells Toyotas. And both sell trucks, of course. For years it's been true that more people seem to move away than move to Aurelius. I always notice houses for sale. The Readers' Club still meets once a month at the library just as when I was a young man. The Terriers, the high school football team, were district champions last fall but lost the state finals to Baldwinsville. Everyone was hopeful for a while. The college football team, the Romans, placed third in their league, with Hamilton placing first. The train service between Utica and Binghamton ended forty years ago. The bus service ended eight years ago. The opera house hasn't had a show since *Li'l Abner* in 1958. One often hears about plans for renovation, but they never come to anything. We have two motels—Gillian's and the Aurelius. The big hotel in the center of town burned when I was away at college in Buffalo in the 1960s. Now there is a small Key Bank on the location. We have two Italian restaurants, plus a McDonald's, a Dunkin' Donuts, and a Pizza Hut. The bookstore, Dunratty's, has gradually become a gift and stationery shop, but they will still order books for you. The Trustworthy Hardware is going strong, as is Weaver's Bakery. We have two bed and breakfasts, which often have guests in fall to see the foliage, as well as parents visiting the college. We have six churches. Saint Luke's Episcopal used to be the largest, with Saint Mary's next, but now both have been left behind by the Good Fellowship Evangelical Church, which meets in the old A & P. Besides Phil Schmidt, the chief of police, we have ten full-time policemen and four to six part-time, depending on the time of year. We have four police cruisers. The fire department is mostly staffed by volunteers, although the fire chief, Henry Mosley, draws a salary.

The downtown is made up of two- and three-story red brick buildings. The top halves—the cornices, pilasters, and simple friezes depicting Progress and Liberty—have some charm. The Weber Building, on the corner of Main and State, displays pedimental windows with round gables on the top floor. Every so often an effort is made to have it named a national landmark. The bottom floors of the building, however, have been modernized with Formica, plastic, and aluminum, show windows and metal doors. That was done in the 1950s. Now the big stores responsible for the renovations—Western Auto, Monty Ward, Rexall—have departed and the buildings look run-down.

City Hall stands across the street from the Weber Building and is more Gothic than classical, with its turrets and red brick. Twenty white marble steps climb to the big double doors. The woodwork is dark and the windows dusty. The mixture of the stately and the shoddy gives our downtown an ambivalent quality and there are always empty buildings for sale.

There must be hundreds of towns like ours in the East. Sleepy, they're called. Sometimes one or another has a star football team or basketball team. The countryside around Aurelius is hilly, with long ridges running north to south and narrow valleys with small rivers or lakes between them. The prosperous farms are in the valleys, the poorer farms are on the hills. Apple orchards lie to the west toward the Finger Lakes. Loomis River runs through Aurelius and there is trout fishing in the spring. Quite a few people have camps on the lakes where they go in the summers or for ice fishing in the winters.

Before that fall when everything went wrong my colleagues at the high school spoke of having a comfortable life. Sometimes a couple or a family went down to New York City for a visit or to see a play, but most stayed in Aurelius. I won't say they felt smug, but they didn't quite see the point of other places. The college had a lecture series and once in a while a string quartet visited from Syracuse, though few townspeople went. Occasionally someone organized a bus trip to a Syracuse football or basketball game. A lot of men hunted in the fall and one heard gunshots from the hills. People tended to vote Republican but they might vote for a Democrat if an exciting prospect came along.

Really, the most excitement our town had seen in years was stirred up by the *Independent* and that was owing to its editor, Franklin Moore. Some people thought Franklin should have taken a job at a paper in Utica or Syracuse after his wife died, which would have allowed many in the town to continue to sleep soundly, though the fact that his newspaper reported certain events hardly made him liable for the consequences of those events. Others thought he should have remarried, meaning he should have done something to occupy his time more fully and left us in peace.

## Two

Franklin Moore wasn't originally from Aurelius. That is not to give him any special charge for what happened, though a few argued that if Franklin had been from town he would have been more circumspect. Perhaps there is something about being an outsider that leads one to act without that sense of investment which might be found in someone with closer ties to the community. People said that Franklin had nothing to lose; he wasn't wedded to Aurelius; he could move if he wished; he had no real ties. But that wasn't true. He had his daughter.

Franklin came here from Rochester five years ago with his wife, Michelle, and Sadie, who was eight at the time. In Rochester he had been a reporter for the *Chronicle.* Before that he had been in journalism school at Cornell and earlier, as an undergraduate, he had written for the *Sun* and become one of its editors. Originally he was from the New York City area.

Franklin was named associate editor of the *Independent* with the understanding that he would be editor within two years. But within a year of moving to Aurelius, his wife developed breast cancer. She was not yet thirty. I believe she worked as a photographer in Rochester and she did freelance work for the *Independent.* Her illness put an end to that. Its progression was sadly familiar: a mastectomy, chemo and radiation therapy, metastasis, further operations and therapies, and then death. By that time they had lived in Aurelius for three years. As happens in a small town, we got involved in her story and watched her get progressively worse. Michelle was buried in Homeland Cemetery and her family came from Bronxville for the funeral.

During the two years of his wife's illness Franklin had indeed become editor of the paper and he worked hard even though his attention and much of his time were focused on his wife. She was a strikingly beautiful dark-haired woman who had to undergo not only sickness but all the humiliations that went with it—the mastectomy, the sallow skin, the loss of her hair. These she faced with a strength that impressed everyone who knew her.

I met her when her daughter, Sadie, was in my seventh grade science class and she and her mother came to school for a parent-teacher conference. Was Sadie working well? Was she attentive in class? The mother assured me I shouldn't worry about giving Sadie too much work, that she was a hard worker. Michelle Moore was very thin at that time and wore a wig, though an attractive one. Yet the simulated health radiated by the wig and the heavy makeup made her seem already like death's creature, even though she was dressed up, disguised as a living, vibrant woman.

She sat by my desk in my classroom, urging me to be tough on her daughter, not out of meanness but to make Sadie a better student. She was clearly a woman who didn't have much time left, yet she made no reference to her illness and almost defied me to notice it. She had great pride, a trait noticeable in Sadie, too, and she spoke of her daughter as eventually going to medical school or veterinary school. In a town where many youngsters drop out of high school and only half the graduates go to college, her ambitions for Sadie were noteworthy. Michelle Moore sat very straight in her chair, talking quietly, sometimes touching a long finger to her chin, sometimes straightening her scarf, and keeping her dark eyes on me the entire time. If she was in pain, she gave no sign of it.

Three weeks later, at the end of October, I heard she was dead. Sadie was out of school for a week and then returned. I searched her face for signs of grief and saw the pallor, the deep seriousness, but she never mentioned her mother or what she had seen. Her mother died at home, having collapsed in the kitchen. Franklin called the doctor but it was too late. People said they were fortunate that it happened so quickly, but what do people know? In such remarks, aren't they always talking about their own deaths? Who knows whether one way is better than another.

Six months after the death of Franklin's wife, people began to see a change in the *Independent.* It became more aggressive, more socially conscious in its editorials. There were more interviews with local residents. People spoke of Franklin's undergoing a great change after his wife's death, but I think mostly that he had more time and he wanted to distract himself from his grief. Simply put, he had several more stories in the paper each week, along with his editorials and columns. Other than Franklin, the paper employed one full-time reporter, a sports reporter, a photographer, and a woman who acted as receptionist, office manager, and copy editor. Without getting any bigger, the paper became more packed somehow; there was less filler.

But perhaps it was more than being energetic and needing to be distracted. "People need to be woken up," Franklin would tell me. He even seemed to drive faster. He had a blue Ford Taurus and one always saw it whipping around corners. Franklin was thirty-four by then. He was an inch or two over six feet, quite thin, with light brown, almost reddish hair, which he wore long and swept back from his forehead. When he walked, he leaned forward so that the top part of his body, the part jammed with intention, would arrive sooner than the lower half. He spoke quickly and a little loudly, and if you were slow in answering a question, he would offer up several alternatives and let you choose. He had a few freckles on his thin face that made him look boyish. And he had a sort of innocence, if that's what you call it when you think others share your passion for the world.

Many people found him pushy but Aurelius is a rather pokey town and its natural pace is no faster than a dawdle. Franklin seemed to move swiftly but perhaps this was the normal speed at which the world moved. He was energetic and caring. He came to every single parent-teacher conference and talked passionately about his daughter. The only peculiarity—and perhaps I'm wrong to find it peculiar—was that he made no mention of his wife. I attributed this to his struggle to move beyond his grief. But in talking about his daughter and her childhood, Franklin would give the impression—accidentally, I am sure—that he had always been a single parent, that Michelle never existed.

Another change was that Franklin sold the ranch house he had owned at the edge of Aurelius and moved

downtown to Van Buren Street. In fact, he bought a house one house away from my own, a white Victorian that seemed too large for just him and Sadie. All the houses on Van Buren date from just after the Civil War, except for the Sutter house, which was the original farmhouse in this area. The house where I live by myself was the house my mother was born in and the one she returned to after the death of her husband, my father, in the war—the Korean War, that is. People said Franklin wanted to be nearer the paper but it also seemed that he wanted to escape the reminders of his dead wife. He even sold his Taurus and bought a white Subaru station wagon.

I would see him outside painting or mowing or raking the leaves. He did everything quickly, almost impatiently. Sadie had a mountain bike, purple with yellow streaks like lightning, and I would watch her riding by. If she saw me, she would wave. She was very thin and her brown hair streamed behind her.

I have heard it said that after his wife's death Franklin lost all civic sense in how he managed the newspaper's connection with the town. Indeed, people claimed the paper's relationship to Aurelius was getting increasingly adversarial. For instance, in his editorials Franklin began to argue that the city council needed to adopt a five-year capital-improvement plan, that the paving and repaving of streets was done unsystematically and the city's sewer system was in bad repair. He argued that if the city council adopted a specific plan, voters would have an exact idea what needed to be done and the city would establish a clear method of channeling its resources instead of being propelled from one minor calamity to another.

Franklin also took issue with the school board for rejecting a proposal to give administrators and teachers a 7 percent pay increase plus dental coverage. The main problem was the dental coverage. Given that nearly half the county lacked health insurance, the board didn't see why the administrators and teachers should have both health insurance and dental insurance.

Franklin argued that the school should set a standard of excellence both in the classroom and in its faculty, that Aurelius could only hope to attract first-rate teachers by offering a decent pay and benefits package. In these editorials Franklin was able to suggest not only that the city council and the school board were in some way backward but also that the schools' teachers and administrators were not of the highest caliber.

Perhaps understandably, many people were content with life as they lived it. We knew the members of the city council and the school board. They weren't bad people. They served their terms, then were reelected or replaced. Franklin's articles, editorials, and columns never caused outrage, but it was like someone sprinkling sand in your bed. When people saw him coming, they ducked. I expect if he hadn't been handsome, if he hadn't been a recent widower with a young daughter, he would have been even more unpopular. He was affable and treated people with respect. But for those who were the subject of his writings, he became a cross they had to bear. They didn't wish him harm but they wished he would go away. Because people began to pay attention. They noticed things they hadn't noticed before. Even if they disagreed with Franklin, they perhaps began to think that Aurelius was less perfect than they had supposed.

Franklin's weekly interviews were even more vexatious than his editorials. He had a way of getting people to say things about themselves that others didn't wish to hear. One of the first was with Herb Wilcox, a local realtor and insurance broker who had been on the city council for twenty years. Everyone knew Herb. They knew his wife, Betty. They watched his three kids grow up. Two went off to college and young Bobby took a job in his dad's office. In the interview Herb made it clear that everything about Aurelius was just right.

"I've been to other towns, I like other towns, but none match up with what we've got here. We got first-rate schools, a good hospital. I can't imagine why people move away. Take my kids Bruce and Mary Lou. Both had scholarships to Aurelius College, but Bruce went to Albany and Mary Lou went to Cortland State. Now Bruce is up in Cohoes. What kind of place is that?"

It continued like this and readers understood that Herb wasn't talking about the perfections or imperfections of Aurelius but the departure of his two older children, his love for them, and his disappointment. Franklin had revealed an area of Herb's vulnerability. Somehow it made Herb smaller, if that is what happens when a person suddenly becomes more human.

The next week Franklin had an interview with Will Fowler, the city manager. We have both a mayor and a city manager. The mayor is elected but he doesn't receive a salary, though he has a secretary, an expense account, and a small discretionary fund. Usually he is a man in the community who likes to shake hands. The city manager is different. He is hired by the city council and often comes from outside the community. Our present mayor, Bernie Kowalski, refers to Fowler as his whip. "I got a whip and the whip gets things done," Bernie often says.

Franklin asked Will Fowler about Aurelius. "It's a pleasant town full of pleasant people." Did he find it perfect? "I find it less than perfect," he said. What about the city council? "I find them less than perfect as well." Did Fowler have any specific complaints about the council? "Perhaps some of them have served for too long." What did Fowler feel about the need to adopt a five-year capital-improvement plan? "Potterville has one. Any town our size usually has one. The trouble is that such a plan makes the city council publicly accountable. Maybe they don't want that." And one last question. You moved here six years ago from Albany. Do you ever miss Albany? "Certainly. It's a bigger city."

Those who had read the interview with Herb Wilcox the previous week felt that Herb had been made to look foolish. By being such a booster he was hurting Aurelius, while his claim of the town's perfection was an excuse not to work harder. As for Will Fowler, he seemed not to appreciate Aurelius at all. He would rather be in Albany. "He thinks we're hicks," one of my fellow teachers said.

And perhaps we were hicks, but we didn't care to think about it. As with Herb Wilcox, we felt we knew more about Will Fowler than we cared to know. "Who does he think he is?" I heard a teacher complain. Fowler was the man hired to operate the town. People wanted him to feel fortunate that he lived in such a nice place. Now they knew otherwise.

Of course, most of Franklin's weekly interviews didn't have such strong repercussions. Still, we learned about one another. It turned out that Tom Henderson, who managed the Trustworthy Hardware, built ships in bottles. Margaret Debois, a nurse at the hospital, played jazz piano at Tiny's in Utica. Lou Fletcher of Fletcher's Feeds was a Baker Street Irregular and was saving his nickels to take a Sherlock Holmes tour of London. A few people refused to be interviewed, such as the fire chief, Henry Mosley, and the pharmacist, Donald Malloy. And I myself refused.

"But why?" Franklin asked me. It was over a year ago and I was raking my front yard. He had seen me and wandered over.

"I don't find myself interesting."

"You worked in New York as a scientist and then came back to Aurelius. That's interesting."

"I was a technician. And whether it is interesting or not, I don't choose to be interviewed about it."

I didn't mean to be rude, but after I said I didn't want to be interviewed, he should have accepted it. It wasn't that he found me interesting. He knew nothing about me except what he might have heard from his daughter. Most likely he was thinking about next week's interview and saw me raking my yard. And many of the people he interviewed weren't interesting—car mechanics, baggers at Wegmans, a plumber. But I must say that in most he found something colorful, which perhaps was why I refused to be interviewed. I didn't want

people to look at me and think, “Aha, I know something about you.” As it was, I believed that Franklin respected me for turning him down. We began to see each other more often. Not as friends but as friendly acquaintances. Occasionally he would drop by and I would give him a cup of tea or I might stop by his house and he would offer me a beer. As I say, only a single house separated us.

Surprisingly, the interview that had the most impact was not with an ordinary townsperson but with a history teacher who had been hired at the last minute by Aurelius College for the second semester. The hiring was done quickly. I say this because if there had been a conventional search this fellow wouldn’t have gotten the job. Not that he was incompetent or stupid. Far from it. But he was a Marxist and an Algerian. He was also outspoken. Before the interview we knew nothing about him except that he drove a little red Citroën that he brought down from Kingston, Ontario, where he had been living. First we saw his car, the red Citroën. Then we learned his name: Houari Chihani.

## Three

Franklin interviewed Chihani in his office at Aurelius College. The main campus, dating from the 1870s, is made up of red brick buildings arranged around a quadrangle of maples and oaks. The buildings have white trim and ivy, white pillars and broad granite steps. Unfortunately, owing to budget constraints, the buildings have become rather shabby, with peeling paint and bricks that need pointing. And the lawns are somewhat ragged, the shrubbery uneven. As for the students, they tend to be a mixed lot. While some programs, such as the equestrian program, draw good students, the SAT scores of the remainder are inconsiderable.

There are many schools in central New York and Aurelius College was rarely a first choice. So the college had special programs for students with learning disabilities, programs for the dyslexic, programs in English as a second language. Some students were bright young men and women from less-than-adequate backgrounds, but many were at Aurelius because no other college accepted them, for one reason or another. And if they did moderately well, they tended to transfer after their sophomore year.

One could say that the students had been exposed to little but what they might glean from MTV and *People* magazine. They did not contemplate the past, nor did they speculate on the future. For most this didn’t matter. They would never be thinkers and all the fuss about learning disabilities and the mentally challenged was only so much hubbub to disguise the fact that they were not very bright. But a few students were intelligent and were only waiting for the right person to come along: like a dry sponge waiting for a drop of water. It could have been anyone. Unfortunately, it was Houari Chihani.

He was a man in his fifties, fifty-five to be exact, who was raised in Algiers, then went to Paris as a teenager during Algeria’s war of liberation against France. His father was a doctor, his mother a teacher. Possibly they felt closer to their French rulers than to their fellow Moslems. And during that war the rebels attacked the moderate Moslems as ferociously as they did the French. For a few years Houari Chihani studied at the Sorbonne, then he left France for Montreal, where he entered the university. It was at the Sorbonne around 1960 that he became a Marxist. It seems ironic that so many Marxist intellectuals came from the privileged classes. Having been brought up in comfort, they sought to deny that comfort to others, while still living comfortably themselves. Although perhaps this wasn’t entirely true in Chihani’s case for he seemed to have an ascetic nature.

Chihani remained in Montreal for three years, then he was accepted for graduate work at the University of Chicago, where he got his PhD in history. There was never any doubt about his brilliance. Despite his accent, he was a superb and persuasive teacher. The difficulty was that he wasn’t simply a teacher, he was a proselytizer of almost religious zeal. Consequently, wherever he taught, he was instrumental in either

beginning or taking over the college's Marxist club or reading group. Perhaps it would have been wiser to have gotten tenure before making himself so obvious on campus; on the other hand, his imprudence only testified to his integrity. He made it perfectly clear where he stood. And it should be said that many believed the controversy he brought to a department was healthy controversy. But the result was still that, after two or three years at a college, he always moved on. Michigan State, Carnegie-Mellon, the University of Windsor, Cleveland State, Lafayette College, Olivet College—till at last he was teaching history at a small college in Kingston, Ontario. And he had lost that job, or rather he had not been rehired for the following fall. He had just one semester left to teach.

In December, however, Max Schnell, a popular history teacher at Aurelius College, was killed in a car accident. The college needed an immediate replacement and Roger Fielding, the history chair, was authorized to begin a search.

Fielding advertised for someone specializing in modern European history and Houari Chihani applied. He looked very good on paper: the PhD from Chicago, the many publications, the praise of his students. Even his recommendations from the colleges where he had taught were good. Often such recommendations are less than candid, especially if they are written for someone whom the college wishes to move elsewhere. The dean of college X wanted Chihani gone and so he wrote him a glowing report. And it should be admitted that Roger Fielding and Priscilla Guerthen, the academic dean, had certain ambitions for Aurelius. Their eyes were perhaps bigger than their stomachs and they saw in Chihani someone who might bring prestige to their little community. After all, wouldn't his books and his many other publications mention that he taught at Aurelius College? And so Chihani was offered a job.

Chihani had no qualms about quitting Kingston College before the end of the year. They had said they didn't want him back, and if he could do a small disservice in return, then he would. He packed his books, shipped them to Aurelius, drove down in his red Citroën, and was in residence by the beginning of January. He had three classes: Western Civilization, Nineteenth-Century European Political Movements, and Capitalism and Labor. By the beginning of February he had started a small reading group, less than half a dozen students, which he called Inquiries into the Right (or IIR), a sufficiently vague title. This was when Franklin Moore interviewed him.

Chihani's office was in Douglas Hall, the humanities building, just to the side of the administration building. It was a third-story room with a skylight and Franklin said there weren't enough shelves for Chihani's books, so that cardboard boxes were stacked against the wall. Franklin described Chihani as a tall, handsome man whose face suggested some bird of prey. Indeed, I remember his nose as quite long and thin with a distinct bend in the middle. High cheekbones, a jutting chin, and thick black curly hair. His skin reminded me of the oak finish of a table or desk. He had long, thin hands, a basketball player's hands, though he took not the slightest interest in sports. He always wore a dark suit, a white shirt and a tie, and sometimes a beret.

A detail that Franklin didn't mention was that Chihani's left leg was longer than his right, so that his right shoe had an extra-thick sole, at least three inches, and Chihani limped when he walked, swinging his right foot, which then struck the ground with a clumping noise. Often he used a cane. I would sometimes hear him in the Carnegie Library in town, prowling back in the stacks, and I would know it was Chihani by the sound of his one heavy shoe striking the wooden floor.

During the interview, Chihani sat behind his desk, which was bare except for a white pad of paper, an expensive gold pen, and the telephone. Franklin sat across from him. He asked Chihani if he minded if he taped their conversation but Chihani preferred that he didn't. So Franklin took notes. At first he assumed that Chihani was glad to be at Aurelius College. Within seconds, however, he understood that Chihani felt that the college was fortunate to have him. Chihani was not a man with a sense of humor about himself. He

admired himself as a brain and as a man with a message. And perhaps his only reason for agreeing to see Franklin for fifteen minutes was to impart some of this message.

Franklin began by asking Chihani how he liked Aurelius, a trivial question to which he expected a trivial reply. He was feeling his way into the interview. Chihani said, “It is a small town like many others: quaint, picturesque, and ignorant.”

Franklin asked him what created that ignorance.

“No knowledge of the world, no sense of the past, no sense of the future.”

Chihani sat in his shirtsleeves with his elbows resting on his desk and the fingers of his right hand pressed against the fingers of his left, making a sort of tent.

Does one need a knowledge of the world, asked Franklin, to have a happy life?

“Not necessarily, but if one wants to raise oneself above the cows and sheep, one needs knowledge. You will argue that cows and sheep have contented lives. I would argue that their ignorance leads to their slaughter. Actions have consequences. Ignorance about the nature of those actions does not free a person from responsibility for the consequences.”

Franklin realized he was on unsteady ground. Interviewing Chihani would be unlike interviewing a local dentist or baker. So Franklin asked Chihani about his past: his youth in Algiers, school in Paris, the universities of Montreal and Chicago. Chihani was divorced and without children. He had no siblings. His parents were dead. He said that he had no idea how long he would be in Aurelius but that as long as he had his books it didn’t matter where he lived. He had rented a house in town. He didn’t expect to buy a house, because he didn’t believe in ownership of the land.

Franklin said that Chihani spoke slowly but without pause or hesitation. He was not a man short of ideas. Nor did he blunt his message with diplomacy.

Franklin said it was too bad that the position at the college should become available as the result of a tragedy.

“It was not a tragedy,” said Chihani. “A shame, perhaps, even a great pity. But the accidental death of a human being engaged in his daily responsibilities is never tragic.”

He left a wife and two small children, said Franklin.

“Then it is an even greater pity, but it is not tragic.”

Franklin asked what Chihani thought about his students at Aurelius.

“Youth is expected to be ignorant. That is a definition of youth: it is unknowing. One assumes the young are capable of being taught. Here the students are not only ignorant, they are apathetic. However, in any situation one finds a few willing students, and that very willingness creates intelligence, or a readiness that passes for intelligence. And those few students can enlist others. Wherever there are a few ounces of chaff, one finds a few grains of wheat. Here there is much chaff.”

And Mr. Chihani’s colleagues at Aurelius?

“They are like the students in their ignorance, but their minds have calcified. At best they may impart information which conventional wisdom deems useful. The degree to which the students digest this wisdom

depends on the degree to which it is made pleasurable. But true knowledge does not depend on charm. The reasoning faculties of the listener are all that are required to convince him of its truth."

And why did Houari Chihani teach?

"I teach to help young people take responsibility for the world and responsibility for one another. There has to be a consequence for education. Mostly that consequence is seen as increased earning power. That is a chimera attached to another chimera: limitless growth. I feel the consequence of education must be responsibility and change."

By change did Chihani mean revolution?

"That is a melodramatic word. I mean responsibility for the world. Historically, we see a fraction of the population taking advantage of the majority, making them ignorant consumers. They work hard at pointless jobs in order to buy the clothes, cars, and toys which they believe will make them happy. They fall into debt, become a version of wage slaves, and seek distraction in violence and sporting events. Education is minimized, the arts are discredited. The alternative is a society which values its members equally, a society which takes responsibility for its people and which acts out of that sense of responsibility, a society which works to decrease the greed, ignorance, and baser natures of its participants, instead of encouraging them."

Do you call that Marxism? asked Franklin.

"One finds many of these ideas in Marx, but just as the theories of evolution have gone beyond Darwin, so have the theories of economics gone beyond Marx."

But don't you teach Marx?

"His ideas were a beginning. You can argue that these ideas also exist in the New Testament. Our job is to prepare young people for the twenty-first century—that is a more complicated task than simply teaching Marxism."

And what did Mr. Chihani think of the people of Aurelius?

"They are asleep. This is the condition they prefer. They are afraid of the world and sleep is a way of dealing with their fear. Someday they will wake. Perhaps something frightful will happen. Indeed, there is no better invitation to the frightful than ignorance—that is, sleep."

## Four

Franklin's interview with Chihani made no one happy. Roger Fielding and Priscilla Guerthen were seen as having made an error in hiring Chihani, which led people to recall errors they had made in the past. When the paper came out on Thursday, the third Thursday in February, the president of Aurelius College, Harvey Shavers, called Roger and Priscilla into his office and read them the interview out loud. People passing in the hall spoke of hearing Shavers's voice. He was a big man and he had a big voice to go with it, a voice well-practiced in public speaking. Shavers was primarily a fund-raiser and he knew how difficult it would be to raise money within the community if someone at the college went on record to call members of that community stupid. For Shavers, what was important was the appearance of quality rather than quality itself. As he had discovered, the brilliant rarely conceal their gifts, meaning they talk too much and create unfortunate publicity. Far easier to have silent mediocrity posing as quality than to have the real thing.

And in the faculty senate there was talk of demanding an explanation. Hadn't the teachers' credibility been disputed? Robinson Smart, chair of the English department, said he would have difficulty facing his students unless Chihani made a public apology to the entire college. These ideas were argued back and forth until it was decided it would be a mistake to give Chihani a soapbox from which to make additional remarks. Instead, the faculty senate agreed to vote on the possibility of censure should Chihani ever again insult their competence as teachers.

The student senate went further and sent a delegation of three students to Chihani to demand an explanation.

"Do you deny that you are ignorant?" asked Chihani.

There followed a certain discussion of the word *ignorance:* how it cast no aspersion on ability, potential, or intelligence. For instance, Chihani confessed himself ignorant of Japanese.

"You should welcome your ignorance," said Chihani, "because it enables you to learn."

They were sitting in his office. That February was very snowy, with only two days entirely free of bad weather. More than three feet of snow covered the ground. It seemed that every time I glanced outside I saw snow blowing past the window.

"What I object to," said Sharon McGregor, who was vice president of the student body, "is that you think I need to know Russian history in order to be a veterinarian."

*"Absolument pas,"* said Chihani, "only to be a *good* veterinarian."

The reaction outside the college was not as strong but it was bitter. There has always been a division between the farming community—the cabbage growers and dairy farmers—and the town itself. The farmers tend to feel a certain scorn for the town and even more scorn for the college. That Chihani was making rude remarks only confirmed their beliefs. The college was made up of idiots and here was a specific idiot to prove the point. The fact that he was a foreigner, a non-Christian, and a Marxist made it worse. To those few farmers who cared, Chihani wasn't quite human. His little red car, his beret, and his oaken skin were too eccentric. He was discussed briefly in the few bars where farmers assembled, then dismissed. Manure smelled, and Chihani had only shown proof of his smell.

Among townspeople the reaction was fiercer. Many thought Aurelius a fine place and here was this Marxist claiming it was less cultured than the North Pole. In taverns the complaints against Chihani tended toward violence: somebody should kick his ass. In politer circles there was talk of Chihani's ignorance of community values. The doctors, lawyers, and businessmen spoke of the warp and woof of friendships and relationships that kept any town running smoothly. Even at Albert Knox Consolidated School there was talk among the faculty of sending Chihani a letter of censure, though nothing was done about it.

If Houari Chihani realized his unpopularity, he gave no sign of it. He taught as ever, arguing his positions in his dry, passionless voice. He was observed downtown and at the shopping mall. Chihani was one of those people who never seemed to take their eyes off their destination, who didn't let their eyes wander curiously over other people or things. He stared straight ahead, as if surrounded by empty space. Often his red Citroën could be seen driving through the snow to his house, then back to campus, then around town on various errands: to Wegmans supermarket, the Trustworthy Hardware. It would have been better if he had driven a more conventional car because his little Citroën was like salt in civic wounds. And indeed, five days after the interview appeared in the *Independent*, Chihani emerged from Wegmans one afternoon to find his windshield smashed and a large stone sitting in the front seat. He put his shopping bags in the trunk, returned to the store, and telephoned the police. Chuck Hawley, a cousin of mine, responded to the call. There was no

sign of the culprit and it was clear that Chihani had called the police only for insurance purposes.

“He wasn’t even angry,” said Chuck. “Snow was blowing into the car but this guy didn’t even notice. He made his statement, signed the form, and that was it. I asked if he’d seen anyone or if he had enemies. I’d read the interview, of course. He said there was no reason for him to have any enemies. Then he got into his car and drove off with the snow blowing in his face. He must have been freezing.”

The day after Chihani’s windshield was smashed, Franklin stopped by my house in the evening with Sadie, and I gave them each a cup of tea. On a bookshelf in the parlor I keep the books my mother read as a young girl, and Sadie settled down to read *Understood Betsy.* She sat with her feet tucked under her in the old wing chair. Her brown hair fell forward to frame her face. She was the image of her father, long and bony. I also set out a plate of sugar cookies. Sadie would take one and break off small pieces to put in her mouth. Other than saying hello, thank you, and good night, I don’t believe she spoke.

Franklin was restless and didn’t care to sit. Though he felt guilty about having run the interview, his very guilt angered him, as if feeling guilty indicated that he wasn’t as good a newspaperman as he should be.

“I neither changed what he said nor exaggerated,” he explained. “If anything, I played down what he told me. I didn’t want to make him seem like a fanatic.”

Franklin wore an old sheepskin coat that reached his knees. Around his neck was one of those British university scarves, blue with two red stripes. He held an Irish fisherman’s hat in his hand and kept hitting it against his leg, knocking off drops of water. Franklin must have been hot but he gave no sign of it. He wore boots with Vibram soles and as he paced back and forth he deposited little wedge-shaped chunks of snow on my grandmother Francine’s Turkish carpet. I’m sure he wanted a cigarette, though I don’t let anyone smoke in my house. Now and then Sadie would smile at him fondly and go back to her book.

“All kinds of people live in a town,” Franklin said. “If everyone acts the same, what’s the point in that? Just the fact this sort of debate exists shows the town isn’t sleepy.”

But it seemed there wasn’t any debate, just anger and resentment. Most of the resentment was aimed at Chihani, but people also knew who had been the medium for Chihani’s views. If Franklin hadn’t conducted the interview, no one would have been any the wiser about this Marxist in our midst.

Franklin flung his scarf on the couch. It seemed a considered gesture, not quite studied, not quite spontaneous—the gesture of a man who isn’t sure who he is and so assumes a borrowed gesture, one that he thinks correct for the occasion.

“My job as a journalist is to make people think. I can write nice stuff they won’t pay attention to, but that means I won’t be doing my job.”

I asked what he was going to do about the smashed windshield.

“I’m going to write an editorial about it.”

And that’s what Franklin did. When the paper came out on the first Thursday of March, it contained an editorial by Franklin attacking whoever had smashed Chihani’s windshield, as well as those people who felt that vandalism was deserved. “If we have any richness as a town,” he wrote, “it must be in our diversity. We are different from one another—not only is this our wealth, it should be our pride. . . . The person who smashed the windshield of Houari Chihani’s car was attacking that very wealth. . . . We must see Chihani’s presence as a virtue. He helps us see ourselves, and to see ourselves is to improve ourselves.”

I doubt that editorial smoothed any wrinkled brows. As I heard one man say in the faculty room, “Franklin’s shaking his finger at us again.” It would have been better to drop the matter and let people forget Chihani, but Franklin took the opposite tack. Since he was afraid of being thought cowardly or, as he might have said, unprofessional, Franklin began to ask Chihani his opinion on various events both in town and in the world at large. He didn’t do this regularly, but every so often there would be an article that included an opinion of Chihani’s. Mostly these were innocent. For instance, during a debate about health-care reform, Chihani was quoted as saying that any country that pretended to be civilized had to care for its people. But in some cases, Chihani’s remarks were disturbing and eventually they became more disturbing than anything he had said in his original interview.

—

It would be incorrect to suggest that Chihani’s remarks were received with universal scorn. One tiny group applauded them. That was Chihani’s reading group. At that point, Inquiries into the Right had five members. Perhaps we can all recall such fringe groups in college. Seeing its members together, one would be aware more of psychology than of intellectual belief. The shy, the pimpled, the resentful—one felt they had joined in order to be against something rather than for something.

For instance, there were two brothers, Jesse and Shannon Levine, a sophomore and a junior respectively, skateboard nihilists whose boom boxes broadcast a music in which static played an integral part. They had blond goatees and were as skinny as whippets, which made their knees and elbows look huge. And they had homemade jail tattoos on their hands and arms: small messages of love and hate, anarchy and discontent. Invariably they wore jeans, T-shirts, and large basketball shoes with the laces undone. Their father taught psychology at the state university in Cortland. Before taking a class with Chihani, they had been on academic probation. Chihani focused them sufficiently to allow them to achieve a C average. He also focused their resentment. Instead of just feeling angry, they now had an intellectual argument to validate their feelings. This made their rebellion a rational act, a sensible course to follow.

I would see Jesse and Shannon downtown. Their new beliefs gave them a cloak that freed them from their defensiveness and let them assume a sort of superiority. They developed Chihani’s manner of keeping their eyes trained straight ahead, of looking as if they were always alone. They put aside their skateboards for the books Chihani explained to them. They saw the rest of us as deluded, culpable, greedy. Their language came to display a jargon that formed a barrier between them and the unenlightened. They believed Chihani’s interview to be an attack against the complacent and they looked forward to future battles. They saw themselves as soldiers and began to dress in dark jeans and jerseys that had a vaguely paramilitary air. They even tied their shoes.

Another member of the IIR was Leon Stahl, an overweight young man who slept during the day and read and argued all night. He seemed never without a family-size bottle of Coca-Cola. He had a round pimply face and a little black moustache. He wore white shirts, gray around the collar, with discolored splotches on the back where pimples had burst. He celebrated his ugliness as a blow against convention, though if he had lost a hundred pounds he would have been handsome enough. Leon panted dreadfully and had a key for the elevators that were reserved for faculty and the handicapped. Before he met Chihani, his favorite book had been *The Golden Bough.* Now he read Chihani’s books and articles and could quote whole passages. He was a passionate arguer and known for never giving up. Once he engaged two other students in an argument on the evils of private property that lasted twenty-six hours. As a freshman he had joined the debating club, as a sophomore he had been elected president, and as a junior he was barred from membership. He wore thick glasses in flesh-colored frames and the lenses always had large, fat thumbmarks across their surfaces. He came from Dunkirk, south of Buffalo, where his parents were high school teachers.

A fourth member was Jason Irving, a tall, thin young man who I had assumed was gay, but later he claimed to have no sex at all. He chain-smoked and drank endless cups of coffee. He played chess with a clock. Jason was vain about his long hair and combed it constantly. He liked to sit in McDonald's and read *Das Kapital.* He was exceedingly polite with his *pleases* and *thank yous,* but beyond that he never seemed to talk. He wore inexpensive rings on all his fingers, even his thumbs. Jason was a good student and wanted to go to graduate school in history. Before joining the IIR he had memorized the sentence "The small black rabbit has stolen the fat hunchback's yellow bicycle" in twenty-six languages, including Farsi. That had been the extent of an intellectual ambition that he later exchanged for Marxism.

The fifth member was a young woman, Harriet Malcomb. She was a junior from Binghamton with long dark hair that hung loose, and she was considered quite beautiful. She was thin to the point of seeming anorexic and she never smiled. Her face had a pallor accentuated by chalky makeup so she resembled a character from the Addams Family. People said she had been sexually abused by a cousin as a young child. When I asked how they knew such a thing, I was told that Harriet herself told the story. Although a radical feminist, she dressed revealingly, showing off her legs and breasts. She often flirted with young men and then, when they responded, she would find fault with them. Perhaps *flirt* is too strong a word. She would appear available, and when the young man tried to approach her, she would show herself unavailable. And she would criticize the young man for approaching her, as if it indicated his sexism, even his bestiality. One had the sense that not only did she think badly of men but she manipulated events to make them seem worse. She was close friends with Jason Irving and they often wore the same clothes, red silk shirts and baggy khakis. Leon Stahl believed that he loved her, and he would follow her around, panting. She would be kind to him, more often than not, and send him on endless errands to buy cigarettes and chewing gum, which was probably the only exercise the poor fellow got. The two brothers, Jesse and Shannon, seemed immune to her charms.

These five students constituted the reading group. Each week they met at Houari Chihani's small house on Maple Street to discuss what Chihani had assigned them: basic Marxist texts, for the most part. When the interview was published, Chihani had been on campus for about seven weeks and it was impressive that he already had a following, though a small one.

The IIR was jubilant about the interview. These were youngsters whose facial expressions ranged from the critical to the sneer. Now they looked happy. The public would understand they were a force to be reckoned with. And when Chihani's Citroën was vandalized, they were all set to picket City Hall until Chihani persuaded them not to.

In the week after the appearance of the interview five new members joined the IIR. Four were from the college: Barry Sanders, a biology student, who had grown up in Aurelius; Bob Jenks and Joany Rustoff, theater majors who had been dating since high school in Utica; and Oscar Herbst, a history student from Troy. He was a sophomore and said Marxism was terribly underrated. These four were young, uncertain, and average, with a vague disaffection that made them latch on eagerly to Chihani's group. The fifth new member was a different sort altogether. First of all, he wasn't part of the college. Though born and raised in Aurelius, he had gone to college in Buffalo. Secondly, he was older, about twenty-three, and he had returned to Aurelius after having been gone over a year. His name was Aaron McNeal, and his father, Patrick, had taught with me at the high school.

## Five

When Aaron McNeal came back to Aurelius, I was aware of a collective sigh of disappointment. We had followed his tangled story for most of his life. We knew his parents' depressing narrative and his mother's awful end. To see Aaron was to bring these stories back to us.

Aaron's mother, Janice, had left her husband when Aaron was six. Instead of moving from Aurelius, she bought a house two blocks away on Hamilton Street in order to be near her son, or so she said. Patrick was able to retain custody of Aaron because of his wife's sexual liaisons, of which she made no secret and which involved some of Aurelius's most eminent citizens, including Judge Marshall, who disqualified himself from the custody hearing in Potterville. There was even a question of Aaron's paternity, it being a popular joke that Patrick McNeal was probably the one man in Aurelius with whom Janice didn't have sexual relations.

Janice was Patrick's second wife. He was older than she and had been married to a woman in Utica by the name of Rachel or Roberta, I can't remember which. In any case, they had had a daughter, Paula, who, from what I can gather, was often the one to take care of Aaron. Some people argued that it was Janice's jealousy of Patrick's former wife and her resentment of Paula that caused her to act badly, but I'm not sure that Janice needed an excuse. She had a lot of energy and she found her husband dull, though she may have liked him in a sisterly sort of way.

Once Janice was separated from her husband she continued to have many men friends. She worked as a technician for the drug company in Norwich and, fortunately, many of her lovers came from there, meaning they were beyond the limit of our gossip. Aaron spent his time in both houses, though Patrick was legally in charge of him. Paula herself spent no time with her stepmother, which seemed to confirm the arguments of those who said that Janice resented her. I saw Patrick often at school and I felt sorry for him. The students knew of Janice's indiscretions and they made his life a misery. It was even claimed that three seniors had visited Janice one night and she had given them their pleasure. At least that was what they boasted. In a small town like ours, something that has happened and something that has not happened but is gossiped about are equivalent. Possibly these youngsters had never been with Janice, but considering the talk, it made no difference.

One would think, given the attention, that Janice was a great beauty; that wasn't the case. She was short, a trifle overweight, and her mouth was large. When she laughed, one saw all her teeth. She had curious eyes, tipped up at the corners and of a greenish color. Her nose was slightly puggy, her chin slightly square. She had short dark hair that curled beneath her jawbone. Perhaps I am a poor judge of female beauty, but I was surprised that men found her attractive. She dressed well, carried herself well, and clearly had a sense of dignity, but when all is said and done I found her somewhat dumpy.

If Patrick had been able to forget his ex-wife, his life would have been smoother, but he clearly adored her and any talk about Janice tormented him. My policeman cousin, Chuck Hawley, once found Patrick outside Janice's house at two in the morning. He offered to give Patrick a ride home but Patrick refused. Chuck said that Patrick was crying. He joked about that. I asked him if Patrick had been drinking but he said no. "He was as sober as a judge," he said.

People expected either Patrick or Janice to leave Aurelius, but neither did. One felt that even though they were divorced, their main relationship was with each other, as if she enjoyed torturing him and he had a need to be tortured, though I am sure they would have denied this.

If Aaron was damaged by his parents' relationship, he gave no sign of it. At least at first. Perhaps this was due in part to his half sister, Paula, who seemed very loving. Aaron was a friendly little boy who would politely greet everybody on the street by name. And he dressed well and seemed very clean, with his blond hair brushed and his freckled face shiny and smiling. While still in grade school, he began delivering the Utica and Syracuse papers, riding his bike with his springer spaniel, Jefferson, running behind him. He seemed to have few friends but he also seemed not to require them. This was untrue, of course, because everybody needs friends, but he seemed content by himself or with only the companionship of his dog and so no one worried, or if they did they soon forgot about it. It was only later, when people recalled his solitude,

that they tried to make something of it, offering it up as a kind of proof.

Clearly, Aaron knew about his mother because she was very open about her boyfriends, and other children taunted him about having a mother whose morals were questionable. I had Aaron in two classes: eighth grade science and tenth grade biology. He was very bright, the sort of eager youngster who always raised his hand and volunteered to do extra work. I had the sense that I would get to know him well, but I never knew him any better than I did on the first day of class.

At sixteen Aaron had reached his full height of five foot ten. His blond hair had become light brown. He was thin without appearing delicate; rather, he had the body of a gymnast, though he took no interest in sports except for riding his bike. He would have been handsome if his eyes weren't so close together, which gave him a slightly fishlike expression. He also had a small L-shaped scar on his left cheek where his dog had bitten him. Aaron had been delivering papers when Lou Hendricks's malamute had gotten loose and attacked Aaron's dog. Aaron had flung himself into the battle and his dog had become so panicked that he bit Aaron, who was thirteen at the time. Even though Aaron received stitches, the scar remained obvious, especially when he got angry. Then, while the rest of his face grew pale, the L-shaped scar would redden.

Once, when Aaron was in eighth grade, his mother came in for a conference. I won't say she flirted but she made me quite uneasy. She stared at me with her slanted eyes and wouldn't look away, till I myself was forced to. Of course I knew Janice's reputation. It was one of those school events when parents go around meeting their children's teachers, spending a few minutes with each. Janice seemed mildly interested in Aaron's schoolwork, but after I established that he was doing well she asked me instead about living in New York City. Someone had told her I once lived there. "But why would you move back to Aurelius?" she kept asking. I was quite relieved when her time was up and the next parent arrived. During tenth grade parent-teacher conferences, Janice never appeared. Of course I often saw Patrick and he knew that his son was doing well.

## Users Review

**From reader reviews:**

**Kathleen Allen:**

The book The Church of Dead Girls: A Novel can give more knowledge and information about everything you want. Why then must we leave a very important thing like a book The Church of Dead Girls: A Novel? Wide variety you have a different opinion about e-book. But one aim that book can give many data for us. It is absolutely right. Right now, try to closer using your book. Knowledge or info that you take for that, you are able to give for each other; it is possible to share all of these. Book The Church of Dead Girls: A Novel has simple shape nevertheless, you know: it has great and massive function for you. You can appearance the enormous world by start and read a e-book. So it is very wonderful.

**Corrine Switzer:**

As people who live in typically the modest era should be change about what going on or data even knowledge to make these individuals keep up with the era which can be always change and make progress. Some of you maybe will certainly update themselves by reading through books. It is a good choice in your case but the problems coming to a person is you don't know which you should start with. This The Church of Dead Girls: A Novel is our recommendation so you keep up with the world. Why, because book serves what

you want and want in this era.

**Beverly Harrison:**

The Church of Dead Girls: A Novel can be one of your nice books that are good idea. We all recommend that straight away because this guide has good vocabulary that could increase your knowledge in terminology, easy to understand, bit entertaining but delivering the information. The writer giving his/her effort to get every word into delight arrangement in writing The Church of Dead Girls: A Novel but doesn't forget the main place, giving the reader the hottest in addition to based confirm resource details that maybe you can be one among it. This great information can easily drawn you into new stage of crucial considering.

**James Sanchez:**

Reading a book make you to get more knowledge from that. You can take knowledge and information from the book. Book is written or printed or created from each source this filled update of news. With this modern era like today, many ways to get information are available for anyone. From media social such as newspaper, magazines, science publication, encyclopedia, reference book, story and comic. You can add your understanding by that book. Ready to spend your spare time to spread out your book? Or just trying to find the The Church of Dead Girls: A Novel when you essential it?

# Read The Church of Dead Girls: A Novel By Stephen Dobyns for online ebook

The Church of Dead Girls: A Novel By Stephen Dobyns Free PDF d0wnl0ad, audio books, books to read, good books to read, cheap books, good books, online books, books online, book reviews epub, read books online, books to read online, online library, greatbooks to read, PDF best books to read, top books to read The Church of Dead Girls: A Novel By Stephen Dobyns books to read online.

## Online The Church of Dead Girls: A Novel By Stephen Dobyns ebook PDF download

### The Church of Dead Girls: A Novel By Stephen Dobyns Doc

#### The Church of Dead Girls: A Novel By Stephen Dobyns Mobipocket

#### The Church of Dead Girls: A Novel By Stephen Dobyns EPub