

Chapter 1

“I have just killed my parients”

On the evening of Tuesday, January 18, 2000, my wife Honoree and I sat on the living-room sofa in our house in Middlebury, Vermont, watching a documentary on PBS. It was a frigid night, part of a long sub-zero stretch in northern New England. We were alone in the house except for our sons’ two cats, a drowsy old orange pile of Maine coon named Spikey and a graceful, mostly white little calico named Tela. Our eldest son Dean, 19 then, was back in Fort Collins, Colorado. He’d returned there after the Christmas holidays to prepare for the spring semester of his junior year as an English major at Colorado State University. Dean’s younger brother, Kevin, 16, had gone back to the Interlochen Arts Academy in Traverse City, Michigan, where he was studying guitar.

Our sons were on our minds as we watched the TV screen that evening. Sons and daughters and brothers and sisters and friends were undoubtedly on viewers’ minds across the nation.

The documentary, part of the *Frontline* series, was titled “The Killer at Thurston High.” Its focal subject was a small and sad-eyed 15-year-old boy named Kiplin “Kip” Kinkel. Kip was the son of Bill and Faith Kinkel, respected high-school Spanish teachers—Bill at Thurston High School near Eugene, Oregon, and Faith at Springfield High, also not far from Eugene. Around the time of Kip’s birth, the elder Kinkels had built the family a dream house, an A-frame isolated in the forested countryside. An ideal place for raising a child. Kip grew up there. The documentary showed home videos of

him as a small boy, romping in the sunshine with his sister Kristin, trying to emulate her cartwheels and handsprings; failing. His father exhorting him to try again.

“Family movies show ten-year-old Kip’s efforts to keep up,” the correspondent intoned.

The voice of Bill, off-camera, said: “Kristin's going to show us some headstands, handstands. Look at that! Can you believe that? Kip's doing a handstand. I think that Kip needs some more work. But he's eager. He's eager.”¹

Kristin was six years older than Kip. She had left the household for Hawaii Pacific University, where she was an excellent student and a cheerleader, when the central events of the documentary took place, on May 20 and 21, 1998.

The correspondent led up to these central events by explaining that Bill Kinkel was a stern man who put pressure on his son to be an athlete. The pressure had frustrated Kip. Kristin, who had served as a mediator, was now gone. Faith Kinkel grew anxious about the boy’s increasingly volatile temper, his episodes of shoplifting, fighting and cheating in school, and one other ominous development: his escalating fascination with guns and explosives. Bill Kinkel remained detached from his wife’s concerns, but he allowed Faith to arrange some sessions with a psychologist. Faith accompanied her son to the sessions. In the first, she arrived with a list of these areas of concern—including her concern about the guns. Kip had begun to collect guns. His first acquisition was a rifle. The provider was his father, evidently as a gesture toward healing the breach with his son. Bill would make several more such gestures.

¹ PBS Frontline, “Murder at Thurston High,” broadcast on January 18, 2000

After nine meetings, spaced about three weeks apart, the psychologist decided that Kip Kinkel had a “major depressive disorder” and recommended that the family doctor give him a prescription for the antidepressant Prozac. And the timetable edged toward the central events.

My wife and I watched the narrative advance toward the central events with stiffening instinctual resistance and gathering revulsion the likes of which no television program had ever before triggered in us. (I had been a professional TV critic for parts of two decades.) We knew what was coming; the title had told us what was coming—or part of what was coming: mass murder. Mass murder of family members and then schoolmates by a boy.

The correspondent proceeded to detail the central events. When they commenced on May 20, a Thursday, Kip was at home on suspension from his school, after admitting the possession of a loaded Baretta that a friend of his had stolen from his father. At about 3 p.m. on the first day, he had crept quietly down the staircase from his upstairs bedroom and into the kitchen behind his father, who was seated at the counter over a cup of coffee. Kip had gone up to his bedroom to retrieve a .22 caliber Ruger semi-automatic rifle, one of several firearms that Bill had consented to give his son as peace offerings during their increasingly fractious relationship. The boy had also visited his parents’ upstairs bedroom, where a large cache of ammunition was stored.

We listened and watched in the silence of our house as the correspondent explained how Kip raised the rifle and shot his father in the back of the head, killing him.

Then dragged the body into the bathroom and put a sheet over it. Then waited for his mother to arrive.

Faith Kinkel pulled up to the garage at around 6:30 p.m., with bags of groceries in the back of her Ford Explorer. Kip was waiting for her. He helped her carry her groceries up the steps into the kitchen. Then he said, “I love you, Mom,” and fired two shots into the back of her head, and kept on firing: a round to her forehead above her left eye. Another into her left cheek. Another into the center of her forehead. Another into her heart. After that was over, Kip Kinkel pulled an operatic CD from its jewel-box, placed it inside the player, and turned the volume all the way up. The music was the tragic “Liebestod” from the final act of Richard Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*. It expresses the erotic tumult and the spiritual release of the two doomed lovers. The spiritual release is achieved via their double suicide. “Liebestod,” translated into English, means “Love-Death.”

Kip is believed to have listened to this piece, alone in the house, throughout that night, hitting the reverse-play buttons again and again. He had many hours of waiting ahead of him before classes began at Thurston High School the next morning.

Sometime during the evening Kip loaded the 9-millimeter Glock handgun that was also a gift from his father, and scooped several handfuls of ammunition into a gym bag. (The *Frontline* report described the family household as “becoming an arsenal” as Bill’s supplicatory gifts piled up.) He taped two bullets to his chest and strapped a sheathed knife around his ankle. He had already written a note, which he’d left on the coffee table in the living room. It read in part:

“I have just killed my parients [sic]! I'm so sorry. I am a horrible son. I wish I had been aborted. I destroy everything I touch. I can't eat. I can't sleep. I didn't deserve them. They were wonderful people. It's not their fault or the fault of any person, organization, or television show. My head just doesn't work right. God damn these VOICES inside my head. I want to die. I want to be gone. But I have to kill people. I don't know why! I am so sorry!”

The correspondent detailed the events of the second day:

“The next morning Kip dressed for school. He put on a trenchcoat to hide the Ruger semi-automatic rifle. He put on a hat with the logo from his favorite band, nine-inch nails.”

Then the boy got into the Ford Explorer and drove to Thurston High School, arriving at 7:45. He parked a distance from the school complex and began to walk toward it. “As he rounded this corner,” the correspondent’s voice said, “the school surveillance camera captured these shots of him.” We watched the images of Kip rounding the corner.

No camera, mercifully, was on hand to record what Kip Kinkel did after rounding that corner. He entered Thurston High School and shot twenty-four students, two of them fatally and at point-blank range. He ran out of rifle ammunition in the cafeteria and was just drawing the Glock when a group of students rushed him. He managed to shoot one of them, a 17-year-old wrestler named Jacob Ryker, through the right lung, before Ryker got back to his feet and led the struggle that subdued Kip. Ryker recovered.

Local police arrived and took the boy to the station. *Frontline* played portions of the police interview, in which Kip could be heard wailing, “I couldn't—I couldn't let—I

had no other choice! God! I had no other choice!” and, “Goddam! These voices inside my head!” And, “I had no other choice!” And, “I had to! I had to! I had to! I had to!”

The documentary ended with this information: “The voices Kip said he was hearing might have been key to Kip's defense in a trial. But in September of 1999, he dropped his claim of insanity. He pled guilty to four counts of first-degree murder, 26 counts of attempted murder. A judge sentenced him to a term of 111 years in prison, with no chance for parole.

My wife and I didn't have much to say about what we'd seen after the TV set went off that night. Usually we like to sit for a while and rehash a program or a movie we've watched. Not this time. This time we finished off what was in our wineglasses and went up to bed, where thin windows and walls, which we took for granted, separated us from the frigid darkness outside.

It had been too horrible. The murders, of course: the parricides, then the killing and maiming the next morning at the school.

But something even worse, something infinitely darker and more malign even than homicide, had stirred to life in our consciousness. The “something” was the idea of *transformation*. Demonic transformation. Or something akin to it. We were not, are not, believers in demons. Yet: the abrupt, inexplicable transformation of a child, *one's own* child, into—what?—an alien being. Unknowable. And perhaps capable of mayhem.

It was not until several days later, maybe weeks or months later; time blurs; that Honoree and I found it possible to share our thoughts about “The Killer at Thurston High.” We discovered that its theme had deeply unsettled each of us, as it had surely

unsettled parents who'd viewed it around the country. We discovered that we shared horror at the murders and sympathy for the bereaved relatives of the dead, including Kristin Kinkel. We discovered that Kip's *transformation* generated the most intense and atavistic horror for both of us.

What we did not share was a conviction that we both held. We kept quiet about it probably because we both knew it was an irrational and almost superstitious conviction—exactly the kind of trite, irrational, superstitious conviction that makes it possible for people to go on living.

The conviction went as follows: *This will never happen to us. This can never happen to us. This is the kind of thing that happens to other people.*

If pressed, we would have admitted that “never” took the thought into the realm of magical thinking. We were not prone to magical thinking. We were rational people. Honoree holds a Ph.D. in biophysics. I am far less credentialed, but a lifetime in journalism has hardened my secular, humanistic skepticism. Demons do not exist.

Yet apparently, for practical purposes, something closely akin to them does.

There remained yet one further, odd, facet of the *Frontline* documentary; a curious one that did not fully engage my attention until I read the program's transcript a decade and a half after its first airing. By that time my mind was well conditioned to detecting significance in the slightest nuance involving transformation in the human mind.

The transcript confirmed my vague recollection that the program had remained all but mute regarding the force that triggered Kip Kinkel's killing spree. The correspondent uttered the word “insanity” only once, near the end, and then only to inform the viewer

that Kip Kinkel had dropped such a plea in his defense at trial. Never referenced at all, even indirectly, was any other descriptor of mental illness—including the word at once the least understood and the most dreaded among lay Americans and neuro-physicians alike.

The word is schizophrenia.²

And what is schizophrenia?

The answers lie everywhere and nowhere. Answers have been sought for centuries before “schizophrenia” had its name; centuries when commoners and scholars, charlatans and doctors, profiteers and philosophers, jailers and priests spoke of its victims as lunaticks, imbeciles, idiots, witches, morons, “the unfit,” “the undeserving” (as in, “. . . of life”). Our own enlightened times have allowed us to stretch this vocabulary to include such precise descriptors as wackos, weirdos, pervos, schizos, psychos, fruit-cakes, basket cases, ding-a-lings, wing-dings, wing-nuts, nut-jobs, wackadoodles, and, of course, crazy people (as in, “No one cares about . . .”).

Answers to the question “what is it?” have been sought within the contexts of God’s judgment, the realm of demons, the supposed venality of mothers, weak character, bumps on the head, hallucinatory drugs, alcoholism, the trauma of military combat (battle fatigue, shell shock, nervous-in-the-service, (“Your nerves, hell, you are just a

² I will generally use “schizophrenia” as a synonym for mental illness in this book unless I am speaking of another, specific affliction, such as the somewhat related yet distinct disorder autism, obsessive-compulsive disorder or Tourette syndrome. Of the more than 200 conditions identified as mental illnesses, none poses a greater or more enduring threat to sanity, even longevity, than schizophrenia and its closely allied afflictions, bipolarity and schizo-affective disorder. Thus it reigns as the most feared and stigmatized—and the least understood—of all the afflictions that beset the human mind.

goddamned coward!”), viruses, a virus-infected protozoan parasite found in cat excrement, late-winter birth, urban life, and genetic inheritance.

That the disorder has genetic roots (but not exclusively genetic roots) has been settled wisdom in the medical world for several years. Its tendency to recur in certain families is but one example of the evidence for that. Yet which genes, and how many, and what exactly it was that turned them into agents of brain destruction, remained a mystery until about a decade ago. And even these recent discoveries cannot be deemed conclusive.

It was not until 2008 that a consortium of scientists associated with the Broad Institute at Harvard and MIT released studies that found schizophrenic patients more likely to possess rare structural changes in their genomes than people without schizophrenia. In addition, changes at two new sites in the human genome were identified as risk factors, bringing the total number of solid genetic links to the disorder to three.

As for genetics—heredity—a landmark study performed at Washington University in St. Louis and published by the American Journal of Psychiatry September 2014 affirmed what neurological researchers had believed in growing numbers for years: that schizophrenia is not a single disease caused by one gene but a group of eight distinct genetic disorders — each with its own set of symptoms.³

These disorders attack the powerful prefrontal cortex, the most evolved chamber of the brain; the “executive suite.” This chamber governs thought, language, and behavior vis-à-vis other people. As Paul Steinberg has pointed out,⁴ the prefrontal cortex can be

³ From an article by Jim Dryden in Washington University Newsroom, September 15, 2014, retrieved from <http://news.wustl.edu/news/Pages/27358.aspx>.

⁴ Steinberg, “Our Failed Approach to Schizophrenia”

made vulnerable by stress, a common condition in adolescence. Steinberg wrote this in the context of a 2012 column arguing that adolescents' interests have been jeopardized by too little education about untreated mental illness and its dangers to them and society; and an under-supply of psychiatrists available to discuss symptoms and treat severe mental illness.

He might have been speaking of Kip Kinkel.

Unfortunately, "schizophrenia" lends itself to a cruder, darker connotation (as if the rational denotation were not dark enough). Springing from this label, somewhat carelessly assigned in 1896, it has stubbornly survived in popular thought through time present. This is the false conception of the *split personality*: the strange capacity of an individual to be one person one day, and quite another person the next.

Very likely, it is this cruder interpretation of "schizophrenia" that has reinforced the age-old stigma of the insane as those who have fallen under the spell of evil: the werewolf. The vampire. Dr. Jeckyll, *transforming* into Mr. Hyde. Perhaps this partly explains why schizophrenia, despite dramatic recent developments in such diagnostic tools as magnetic resonance imaging, optogenetics, and electroencephalogram readings, persists (like cancer) in awakening phobias of the unspeakable. A National Alliance on Mental Illness survey in 2008 found that 85 percent of Americans recognize the term "schizophrenia" and know it is a disorder, just 24 percent have a working comprehension of it. Sixty-four percent subscribe to the "split-personality" myth.

Honoree and I welcomed Dean Paul Justin Powers into our lives on November 18, 1981. He arrived three weeks late and on my 40th birthday. I later joked with Honoree that a necktie would have been just fine. But the fact is that I cherished this boy from the moment his bright, questioning eyes emerged into the world. I'd never particularly expected to have children, nor thought much about it, through my extended (over-extended) years of bachelorhood. Now, at my advanced parenting age, my abstracted notions of children as "options" that brought "responsibilities" and presented "challenges" and "impediments"—these notions evaporated against the reality of Dean's corporeal warmth, his sacred helplessness and gratitude for nourishment, the daily lengthening of his fingers and thumbs. I soon forgot what it had been like living for forty years without a child. A son.

We'd hailed a taxicab to get us from our apartment to Mount Sinai Hospital for the birth. It was the hospital where Honoree worked as a research associate, switching her field from biophysics to biochemistry. We lived on the upper west side of Manhattan then, a block from Riverside Drive and the long, narrow green belt that separated Riverside from the Hudson river. I had left Chicago, where I'd worked in journalism, three years earlier to come East and marry this miracle of a woman with green eyes and waist-length, braided dark-red hair, and a gentle manner, and a stunning intelligence. Honoree and I had met on an airplane at LaGuardia, destined for Chicago, in the spring of 1978. We were both walk-ons. I was returning to the Midwestern city after gathering material for a book. Honoree, with her freshly earned Ph.D. in biochemistry from the University of Chicago, had flown to her native city to interview for the Mount Sinai position that became hers. The daughter of an Irish immigrant, a long-widowed mother of

three children named Honora—Honoree was the last-born and the only girl— my bride had experienced a childhood of near-poverty in Washington Heights, an enclave of immigrants—mostly Irish then, mostly Dominicans now. Her father died when she was 5; her brothers were off in their worlds; and so Honoree immediately became the caretaker for her mother.

Dean grew to be a dreamer in his toddler years, and he remains a dreamer. I wrote my articles and manuscripts at home, with an eye on him, in our seventeenth-floor apartment on West 86th street, across the street from a building where Babe Ruth had once lived. Honoree studied the movements and mutations of steroid hormone cells in the uterus at her Mount Sinai lab. This arrangement gave me the chance each day to load Dean into his canvas-and-aluminum carrier, strap it to my back, and take him with me on trips up to Broadway for visits to the dry-cleaner, the wine-shop, the supermarket, the little Greek take-out where roasted ducks turned on a spit. I had brought a Midwesterner's wariness of New York City with me when I came to live there; but with Dean fastened tightly to my back—I could feel his bouncing and rocking—an irrational feeling of indestructibility always enveloped me. Who, however depraved, could possibly bring harm to such a radiant glad child? Who, or *what*?

Television had examined mental illness many times before “The Killer at Thurston High” and has examined it many times since. The landmark 1971 Fred Weisman film shown on public television, *Titicut Follies*, documented the fetid halls and sleeping-rooms and the barbaric staff beatings and mockery of inmate/patients at the notorious Bridgewater (MA) State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. A year later

Geraldo Rivera, then a first-year reporter for WABC News in New York, won a Peabody Award for his infiltration and visual depiction of the filthy, overcrowded Willowbrook (Long Island) School for mentally disabled children—an institution that Robert F. Kennedy had called “a snakepit.” In the first two decades of the Twenty-first century, the attention has continued apace. The three “major” networks, along with HBO, have produced exemplary documentation. *Frontline* itself has revisited schizophrenia a number of times. Schizophrenia has even worked its way into dramatic themes of prime-time entertainment: the ultimate badge of acceptance, one supposes, of mainstream American thought.

Yet something about the PBS accounting of the Kinkel family’s fate has always stayed with me. Not just as a harbinger, however partial, of what would befall my family, but as an unintended marker of our failure, our self-designed failure, to isolate and fully attack schizophrenia as an ongoing social calamity and to safeguard its victims with a passion and thoroughness worthy of our ideals. This book is intended to nudge us, however incrementally, in that direction.

I read the transcripts of that program and its follow-ups, as I said, a decade and a half after the first broadcast. The intervening years, years in which my family found itself invaded and vitiated by mental illness, allowed me to perceive several patterns that were not apparent or did not seem significant on that cold mid-January night in 2000.

I must preface my thoughts about these “patterns,” and indeed my book, with a declaration of humility. I am not an authority on schizophrenia or on the human brain. No one is, in the final analysis. But especially not I. “Schizophrenia” is a hall of mirrors: an

enigmatic scourge that has eluded final understanding by the best diagnostic minds and scanners. This most dreaded and least understood of assaults on self-hood from within the self, this peer to the devastation of cancer via its capacity to terrorize and to dismantle the personality, to shorten the sufferer's life and to threaten the lives of others, schizophrenia beggars the assurance of neuroscientists. A layman such as myself who sets out to survey the modern contours of this affliction soon finds that nearly every academic/professional assertion about its nature has been matched by an equally persuasive counter-assertion, or three.

As to the patterns:

No member of Kip's family thought to link the boy's emerging dark behavior to the possibility of severe mental illness and to seek out a psychiatric specialist, as opposed to a psychologist, with this possibility in mind. (Psychologists are generally permitted to make diagnoses of this sort, but they generally lack medical training and specialized knowledge of the brain.) The father at first essentially denied the presence of any disturbance whatsoever, and then seemed to see it mostly as a "relationship problem." This is hardly exceptional: few parents possess the fortitude, the fonts of information or the finances necessary to make such a drastic assumption. Yet this lack of inclination has proved costly.

Somewhat more alarming is a certain topic that arose during one of the consulting sessions: a topic of interest to both the counselor and Kip; a topic they discussed as fellow enthusiasts, and not in a context of concern. The topic was guns. In the course of their "therapeutic" conversations, the psychologist told Kip of his admiration for the

Glock, the Austrian-made semi-automatic pistol whose several variants saturate the collections of American gun-owners. (“The GLOCK pistol is easy to operate, particularly under stress,” boasts the manufacturer’s website.) Kip immediately began pressuring his father to buy him one, and, reluctantly, his father did.

After several weeks on the medication and sessions with the psychologist, Kip Kinkel’s temperament improved, and led to the enactment of another misguided pattern. Driven by what proved to be fatally wishful thinking, Kip declared himself “cured” and asked to be taken off counseling and medication. Faith granted him his wish. Apparently no one involved had yet confronted the possibility that schizophrenia was at work. Prozac is an antidepressant, not an anti-psychotic. Thus, irrespective of the drug’s use and withdrawal, the baneful affliction had maintained, unimpeded, its work of disrupting the brain’s cohesion.

Consenting to the release of the gun-obsessed Kip from the sessions suggests that the psychologist apparently was not put on alert by the most conspicuous social pattern in America at the time: the growing incidence of mass killings by troubled adolescents with guns, nearly always in their homes and/or at their schools. From 1980 through 1984, schools reported nine shooting incidents. Between 1985 and 1989 there were 22. Another 22 shootings occurred from 1990 up through the last day of Kip’s counseling on July 30, 1997. The last school shooting before the therapy sessions ended happened on February 19: an angry and depressed 16-year-old student in Bethel, Alaska, took a shotgun to school, shot a teacher to death and wounded two students. Then he murdered the principal.

The deadly assaults carried on into the 21st century, spreading to other densely packed public places with robotic regularity and efficiency. And beginning in the century's second decade, the deranged themselves, in particular the African-American deranged, began receiving heavy fire. Police departments across the nation—urban, suburban, and rural—began obtaining military weapons, including assault rifles and tanks, and were learning military combat tactics. The S.W.A.T. team overtook the marching band as a symbol of community pride.

In the Bethel murders, the young shooter later claimed that he did not understand that pointing the shotgun at people and pulling the trigger would lead to their deaths. His father, who had done time in prison after bringing a semi-automatic rifle and a snub-nosed .44 magnum into the offices of the Anchorage Times after the paper refused to print a letter he'd written—the action earned him temporary celebrityhood as “The Rambo of Alaska”—later said he thought he knew the source his son's behavior. It was the video game *Doom*.

Doom and other violent video games, in fact, were to be cited as likely motivation for a lot of the mass-shootings by adolescents that escalated through the late 1980s and the 1990s. Video games were blamed for the depravations of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who would slaughter twelve of their fellow students and a teacher and wound twenty-four additional students before killing themselves at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, on April 20, 1999. School bullying came in for a lot of finger-pointing as well. As did the lack of school dress codes, which gave students the right to wear sinister –looking trenchcoats that somehow reinforced their self-images as outlaws and took their fantasies to the level of acting-out. Media commentators made a

lot of the fact that Harris and Klebold wore black trenchcoats and belonged to a “trenchcoat mafia.”

The speculation targeted problematic parents. And a culture-wide slipping-away of “values.”

One theory was conspicuous in its absence from this exotic inventory. Human intuition might well consider it the most plausible theory for explaining these shocking, abrupt transformations of boys into violent mass-killers. Surely it is at least as credible as video games and bullying and absent dress codes, and not necessarily to the exclusion of them. Yet it was virtually never mentioned in all the breaking news accounts and the lengthy post-mortems that followed every home and school-shooting atrocity.

This theory, of course, involves schizophrenia. More precisely, schizophrenic psychosis as the impetus to an act of violence.

It is essential to stipulate a critical caveat here. To raise the specter of psychotic killers is to risk reinforcing an unjust, destructive and already hardened stereotype: that “schizophrenic” and “violent psychotic” are interchangeable terms. They are not. And yet it remains irrefutable that some of the most appalling acts of bloodshed, including many suicides, parricides and the mass-murders that have haunted recent history, have been perpetrated by people, nearly all of them young men, in the throes of psychosis.

But sadly enough, there remains a grain of truth to the stereotype. The statistics that compare psychotic and non-psychotic killings are not interchangeable either. A myth—understandable in that it functioned as a counterweight to fear and bigotry—prevailed for years among neuro-psychiatrists. The myth held that schizophrenia sufferers committed violent acts about the same rates as the general

population. Statistical analysis since the 1980s has refuted this assumption. This newer research has generally focused on *untreated* victims of the disease, and has taken into account such factors as substance abuse and agitated emotions.

Dr. E. Fuller Torrey's Treatment Advocacy Center in Arlington, Virginia, whose efforts on behalf of the mentally ill are exemplary and its reputation substantial, reported in 2006: "A subset of people with schizophrenia and other psychoses are dangerous if their paranoid delusions and other symptoms are not treated, especially if they are also abusing alcohol or street drugs." The report went on to say that "eight major studies of violence among seriously mentally ill individuals have been reported in the United States since 1990. Together they show that 5 to 10 percent of such individuals commit acts of serious violence each year . . . Homicides are the best documented and supreme expression of violence . . . it seems apparent that individuals with psychoses are responsible for at least 5 percent of homicides in America."⁵ Schizophrenics comprise roughly 1 to 1.5 percent of the population, something over three million people.

The TAC's point was not that mentally ill people are more dangerous than "sane" people. The point was that the *untreated* mentally ill can be more dangerous.⁶

⁵ "Schizophrenia Research: Violence and schizophrenia," The Treatment Advocacy Center, 2006, <http://www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org/resources/about-mental-illnesses/schizophrenia/1393-schizophrenia-research-violence-and-schizophrenia>.

⁶ By "untreated," Dr. Torrey and the TAC generally mean "untreated by antipsychotic medication," although psychiatric counseling plays a part as well. This claim enjoys wide support among psychiatrists and hospitals, yet as seen earlier, it also has drawn entrenched criticism, most prominently from the psychiatric investigative journalist Robert Whitaker, whose views will be examined later.

The *Frontline* documentary itself was typical in stepping around the schizophrenia issue. Its examination of Kip Kinkel carefully refrained from speculating about any sort of neurological causation. It could be that, by avoiding the mental-illness factor, *Frontline* was trying to keep its report confined within the provable facts of the case. Yet at least one of those facts, one that pointed strongly to the likelihood of schizophrenia, went unexamined: the documented voices in Kip's head. The note that he'd left on the sofa the night of the killings and his wailing cries during the police interview, audible in the broadcast, both alluded to the voices. A third incident, unmentioned by *Frontline* yet available in hearing transcripts, occurred three weeks before Kip's rampage. In the midst of a high-school class, Kip blurted out an almost word-for-word iteration of his previous outbursts:

"God damn this voice inside my head!"

There it was. No single symptom is as commonly reported by schizophrenic sufferers or as etiologically linked to the disease as the hallucinatory hearing of voices. Yet *Frontline* chose not to point out the connection. It stopped short.

This reticence placed *Frontline* squarely within the limits of its host culture in terms of willingness to name the beast and throw light on the implications. Kip Kinkel's teacher demonstrated this latter truth in a celestially clueless reaction to the boy's classroom outburst. The teacher filled out a "respect sheet" and handed it to Kip. The "respect sheet" said in part: "The expected behavior for this situation was not to say 'damn.'" It continued: "In the future, what could you do differently to prevent the problem?"

"Not to say 'damn.'"

The teacher, Kip, and Kip's mother all signed the 'respect sheet.'⁷ Next case.

The Oregon attorney Elisa Swanson discovered this passage in a hearing transcript and incorporated it into a blistering "Comment" essay in the Oregon Law Review. Swanson, who apparently has little tolerance with denial or avoidance, began her essay with an indictment of what the treatment of Kip Kinkel implied for society:

This Comment uses the recent case of Kip Kinkel to illustrate our systemic failure to give serious credence and thorough care to the young mentally ill in our society. As evidenced by the lack of meaningful mental health care provided Kip throughout his youth and our decisions to prosecute him as an adult, require a mandatory minimum sentence without possibility of early release, and effectively nullify any defense he may have had based on his mental condition, we have decided that the "Rehabilitative Ideal" of the Progressive movement is dead. Oregon has unambiguously chosen to focus on retribution and incapacitation as criminal justice priorities, thereby laying the groundwork for the resolution of Kip's case: he killed, ignore the details, and warehouse him until he is dead.⁸

Years after the Kip Kinkel telecast, and after the invasion of psychosis into my family's life, I discussed these matters of omission with a psychiatrist friend of mine who was practicing in Vermont. John Edwards is a lean transplanted South Carolinian who has more than forty years' experience in dealing with schizophrenic patients. The epidemic of mass killings had abated somewhat during this period, and the news had shifted toward the treatment of these sufferers at the hands of the state: the gunning-down of a homeless and hopeless psychotic in New Mexico, the point-blank fatal shooting by a police officer of a skinny 18-year-old struggling on the floor of his family's house in North Carolina in

⁷ Elsa Swanson, "'Killers Start Sad and Crazy': Mental Illness and the Betrayal of Kipland Kinkel," the Oregon Law Review, Winter 2000, Vol. 79, No. 4; Copyright 2000, University of Oregon, Elisa Swanson.

⁸ Ibid.

a psychotic state; the scandal of neglect and patient abuse at Milwaukee County Hospital (“No one cares about crazy people”!), the reports of unchecked atrocities visited on young inmates by guards at Riker’s Island.

I ticked off this litany, and then asked Edwards: why do you suppose *Frontline* avoided the schizophrenia possibility? Why do you suppose it did not occur to Kip’s family, his psychologist, his teacher? Why do state governments rely so heavily on retribution through law enforcement and the criminal-justice system in these kinds of cases?

He answered unhesitatingly. “Primal fear,” he replied. “Primal fear is most likely the common denominator.” He considered this for a moment, then continued: “ I think primal fear is the origin, regarding mental illness, of all the misinformation, the projections, the denial, the blaming of the victim or the patient, the lack of empathy toward the sufferers, treating adolescents as criminals, cutting budgets for treatment centers—all of it. Human beings are terrified of this disease, and they try to deny it out of existence.”

I thought back to the silence that my wife and I had shared after the telecast.

Primal fear. The fear of demonic transformation.

It made sense.

Kip Kinkel was re-diagnosed—perhaps “diagnosed” is the better word—nine years after the killings. At a hearing in 2007 for a re-trial based on an insanity plea, a psychiatrist and a clinical psychologist testified that the youth exhibited classic signs of paranoid schizophrenia, the voices in his head paramount among them. The judge denied

Kinkel a new trial. In 2013, his attorneys applied for a resentencing, and again were rebuffed.

By the age of 2, Dean had taken on many of his lifelong characteristics: a head of thick tousled brown hair; hazel eyes that approximated Honoree's green ones; a solemn expression that mirrored my own. He remained an amiable child, and dreamy. Our daily excursions by now involved us walking hand in hand the half-block from our building to West End Avenue and across it into Riverside Park. It was seldom an express journey. One of New York's thousands of iron sidewalk grates, probably once used for delivering coal, lay in our path to the street corner. Dean could not pass this grate without stepping on it, pausing, and bending over to peer down into its darkness. His peering could take a while. This often caused a flash of anxiety in the Midwestern father: these grates were known to give way once every so often. Yet I never really worried. I still irrationally thought of my son as indestructible, and myself as indestructible in his vicinity.

Once inside the park, my son made straight for the playground equipment. He loved the slide. More accurately, he loved to climb the steps to the pinnacle of the slide. There he would pause and stand, casting his dreamy gaze across the Hudson into New Jersey until the children following him were stacked up in a kind of kid gridlock. Usually, I could snap him out of it.

By the time he was four, our excursions were growing more adventurous—or as Dean would have said, “vaventurous.” Dean loved having “vaventures.” We would walk up to 86th and Broadway and board the IRT subway (or “the sunway,” in Dean's innocent consecration) for the long ride down to the tip of lower Manhattan. There we would

catch the ferry to Ellis Island, where we'd both crane our necks to admire the stately green woman holding the torch aloft, the figure Dean admired as The Statue Delivery. Or we'd cab it over to the Museum of Natural History to check out the giant fiberglass blue whale and the dinosaur skeletons. Then an obligatory stop: the African diorama that features the young baboon, having rounded a bush, screeching to a halt in front of the welcoming viper. Dean always became thoughtful looking at that one.

Back home, after dinner, with bedtime approaching, I would grab each of my small sons by a hand and escort them into the bedroom, over Kevin's loud pleas for "A FEW MORE MINUTES!" I would stuff them into their pyjamas and deposit them on the top bed of their bunk, then scramble up myself, where the three of us would lie on our backs, me with an arm around each, and gaze up at the ceiling, where a stick-on galaxy of glow-in-the-dark moon and stars eased the darkness and drew us into a cosmos where nothing was ever wrong. I would lull them to sleep with home-made bedtime stories.

On summer Saturday and Sunday afternoons Dean and I might just chill out in the apartment and catch a Mets matinee on TV while Kevin jumped in his Jumper, rooting for a dinger from Dean's favorite player, The Terrible Strawberry.

One mudpuddly autumn day, Dean and I were alone in the tiny playground in Riverside Park. Dean was on a swing, and I was standing a few yards away, watching him. Something made me shift my gaze and take in a shape on the playground's far border. A thin young man with rainwater dripping from his black, oily hair stood watching my son. His hands were in the pockets of his mouse-colored raincoat. It could have qualified as a trench-coat. After a while he shifted his gaze from Dean to me. The two of us stood motionless, our eyes locked onto each other's. No other human being was

visible except for Dean, who swung happily. I tried to calculate whether, if I broke into a sprint, I could reach my son before the stranger did. I was maybe three long paces closer than he. I bent my knees a little and tensed for my lunge, but otherwise I did not move; not yet. I was waiting for motion from him. Our eyes remained interlocked. After perhaps half a minute, the stranger gave a brief half-smile; then he turned his back and walked away. I quickly closed the distance between my son and myself. After that, my delusions of invulnerability went away.

Kevin Berkeley Powers rocketed into the world on July 21, 1984. He emerged with such velocity that for an instant it looked as though he might shoot right through the obstetrician's gloved hands. The doctor made a fine last-second two-handed catch, and moments later detached the umbilical cord, and our second son was in his mother's arms, grabbing a quick nap before continuing his adventures.

Velocity was Kevin's modus, in many ways. By the time of his birth we had moved from west-side Manhattan to a little two-story brick house in Yonkers, just across Riverdale Boulevard from the city. We'd brought Honora along with us to watch over the boys while we were at work. (The year before Kevin was born I had taken a job as a commentator on CBS News Sunday Morning.) The house featured a fenced-in backyard, which served to keep him, I sometimes imagine, from power-toddling over the horizon. As it was, he liked to traipse quickly over the flagstones near the steps to the kitchen and onto the grass, each small hand raised to ear-level, his diaper bobbing along. Indoors, he favored his Jolly Jumper, a springy harness we'd affixed by a bar in a doorway, and he jolly-jumped for what seemed like hours on end.

Kevin was ivory-skinned, whereas Dean was darker, and his hair, when it appeared, grew long and yellow and curly above his blue eyes. Dean, more laconic, observed this new arrival with amusement and tolerance. Two years and eight months separated them in age; they became amiable playmates and, later, friends; and, later still, a promising guitar duo.

One warm day, when Honoree was gently rocking Kevin on the backyard swing-set, she absently hummed a few bars of music: the musical scales, in fact. This produced a shriek of laughter from the baby. She hummed the scales again, and Kevin again shrieked. This was the first intimation of what we would come to regard, with justification, as his musical genius.

For several years I had been lecturing in nonfiction every August at the Bread Loaf Writers Conference near the Green Mountains national forest above Middlebury, Vermont. Dean's first visit to Bread Loaf occurred three months before he was born: Honoree, her hair still waist-length and braided then, was radiant in a violet paisley ankle-length maternity dress. Through a stroke of good luck, our assigned lodging for the 16 summers of visits there was a modest little literary shrine: the Homer Noble farmhouse, a 19th-century white woodframe that sat atop a hillock less than a mile from the Bread Loaf campus. A dirt road bordered by blackberry bushes connected the farmhouse to the main road. Behind it, to the north, stretched a rising meadow; and beyond the meadow lay woods. Robert Frost purchased the cottage in 1939 as a summer

residence, and wrote there, and in the smaller log cabin near the woods, until his death in 1963. In 1968 the homestead was designated as a national landmark.⁹

The boys experienced Bread Loaf as a kind of Brigadoon, a nonesuch kingdom that swept into view every August around a mountain-road curve at the end of a five-hour car ride: a permanent summery little realm of right-angled wood-frame buildings (the residence dorms) painted in bright yellow with green roofs and shutters, and ringed in the distance by fog-crowned mountains. The dominating structure is the Inn (more dorm rooms, the long dining hall, the administrative office, a fragrant fireplace), whose original construction traces to the first year of the Civil War. The Inn faces south across the main blacktop road, a stone fence, and alfalfa fields. And then more mountains. In back of the Inn rises a grand old three-story structure with gigantic Alice-in-Wonderland doors. The Barn contains classrooms and a spacious main floor where participants go to read, and talk, and eat, and dance on Friday nights. Down a hill behind the Barn is a final unexpected wonder: a small pond with a miniature island crowning its center, and a wooden raft for getting there.

Many grownups, alighting at the campus from their airport shuttles, are stunned to silence by the intensity of this abrupt transition to what seems a palpable, perfect past. For an urban child open to enchantment, it can seize the soul and never let go. Dean and Kevin were such children. They gave themselves to this kingdom populated by a couple hundred grownups of mysterious provenance to them; mellow, friendly, strolling people who tended to disappear en masse inside the Barn and the other outbuildings from time to

⁹ And on a snowy night in December 2007 the Homer Noble farmhouse was invaded by some thirty adolescents looking for a place to party. The intruders smashed a window in the house, unlocked the front door, and brought in kegs of beer and rum. They proceeded to get drunk, vomit, urinate, and break dishes, antiques and an ancient chair.

time, only to emerge about an hour later, stroll some more, and then vanish back into the buildings. Some of these people had children of their own, and so a kind of kingdom-within-a-kingdom existed: little ones poking their heads out of igloos woven from the alfalfa, or waiting their turn for a ride to the island on the raft piloted by a Bread Loaf staffer, or sharing a long table in the clattering laughing dining hall.

Our sons loved the Frost farmhouse as well—the “Hobo Nobo” was as close as they could get to its name for a few years. They inhaled its ancient musty aromas of charred firewood and the petrified glue of old books. In the evenings, as the grownups sat in the Little Theater listening to, say, Paul Mariani rumble forth his poems of working-class grace in his Long Island workingman’s baritone, or to Linda Pastan’s piercing epigramic lines (“I made a list of things I have/to remember and a list/of things I want to forget,/but I see they are the same list”) the children frolicked in the safe Vermont night.

The dining hall was the scene of Dean’s first competitive triumph. In his first post-birth summer at Bread Loaf, he won the Marvin Bell Look-Alike Contest. Marvin Bell was and is a poet of great distinction and luminous madcap gifts in the lineage of Walt Whitman and of Bell’s friends Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. He was short and the possessor of an unruly beard. Marvin Bell was an Eminence, and his visits to Bread Loaf were Occasions; and so it was deemed necessary to cut him down to size a little: hence the Marvin Bell Look-Alike Contest. On Dean’s big night, he was perched in my lap at the end of dinner. Dessert was being served—plates of chocolate pudding—when the Contest was announced. Entrants began readying themselves: tousling their hair, squinting. On impulse, I scooped a glob of chocolate pudding out of my dish and rubbed

it on my infant son's cheeks and chin: a chocolate beard. He didn't seem to mind. When the candidates were asked to step forward, I held Dean high above my head. The Bread Loafers at their long tables spotted him almost at once and released a salvo of applause. He won by acclamation. I spotted Marvin Bell clapping.

Within a few years we began to entertain thoughts of moving there. To Vermont, and the vicinity of Bread Loaf. The conference director, a professor of English at Middlebury College, encouraged us. He promised Honoree that he could get her an appointment as a visiting professor of biochemistry, with the strong possibility of a tenure track.

With our idle pipe-dream at the threshold of reality, my wife and I hesitated. Honoree was a lifelong New Yorker. My livelihood was tied to the city. Yet we were tempted, largely because of our sons. They loved Vermont so much. We did not discuss the idea with them. They would have pleaded with us until they wore us down. In fact, neither of us was averse to the idea. It was just that risk of severing our economic ties. . .

Among the city pleasures Honoree and I enjoyed was live music; in particular, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. For years we'd held tickets for the performances at Alice Tully Hall. As New York denizens, we could walk there or take a subway. The trip from Yonkers required a car. And as suburban dwellers, it turned out that we'd lost some of our city alertness. One evening we were late getting started, and reached Lincoln Center only a few minutes before the curtain. The underground parking lots were filled, and distant, and so we took a chance leaving our car on Tenth Avenue.

The resulting damage was not drastic—a broken window, some audio cassettes looted. But in the time-honored spirit of mugged urban liberals everywhere, Honoree and I looked at one another, and one of us said: “Let’s go to Vermont.”

To Vermont. Vermont. Vermont.

And so we did; we went to Vermont; and we were so happy for a time.