

UNSPEAKABLE SECRET

What happened on the night Michael Shea can neither forget nor believe?

BY GARY SMITH

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRIAN SMALE

YOU WILL PROBABLY NOT BELIEVE THIS STORY. EVEN THE MAN IT IS ABOUT DOUBTS that it happened to him, although the memory of it sometimes is so terribly sharp it seems it must be true.

The strange thing is that hundreds of people have come forward in the last few years with accounts strikingly similar to his. Three books about those people and what happened to them made best-seller lists in 1987; "60 Minutes" and virtually every talk show devoted segments to the phenomenon; "Miami Vice" incorporated it into a plot. Last June, the largest scientific symposium ever held on the subject occurred in Washington, with speakers from 12 countries and observers including the crown prince of Lichtenstein and Sen. Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island.

Some of the people involved in the phenomenon have passed lie-detector tests and were declared by one psychologist to have no mental disorders. "Did it really happen?" is the only question that concerns most people, but since there is no unarguable proof that it did or didn't, perhaps there are other questions to consider. What has caused so many people to *recall* its happening? Is external reality, verifiable by the five human senses, the only kind of reality? How does a man carry on his life after something shatters his old definitions?

A man, for example, who is a 42-year-old government lawyer in Washington . . .

HE STEPPED OFF THE SUBWAY ESCALATOR IN DOWNTOWN D.C. SCRATCHING THE freckles at the roots of his auburn hair, not because they itched but because it occupied his hand. His 12-story office building, bureaucratic gray at the top and blackened by soot at the bottom, stared down at him from its 318 eyes. He should have stayed home today. Turn back now, he thought, no one has seen you yet. His legs carried him across the street toward the gray building and the row of swinging doors.

He glanced at his wristwatch—exactly 8—and sensed the strides of all the men quicken as they marched into the building in blue and gray suits, clutching briefcase handles and once-folded newspapers. A serious young man with dark hair and spectacles looked at him as they pushed adjacent swinging doors. *Why did he look at me? Does he know?*

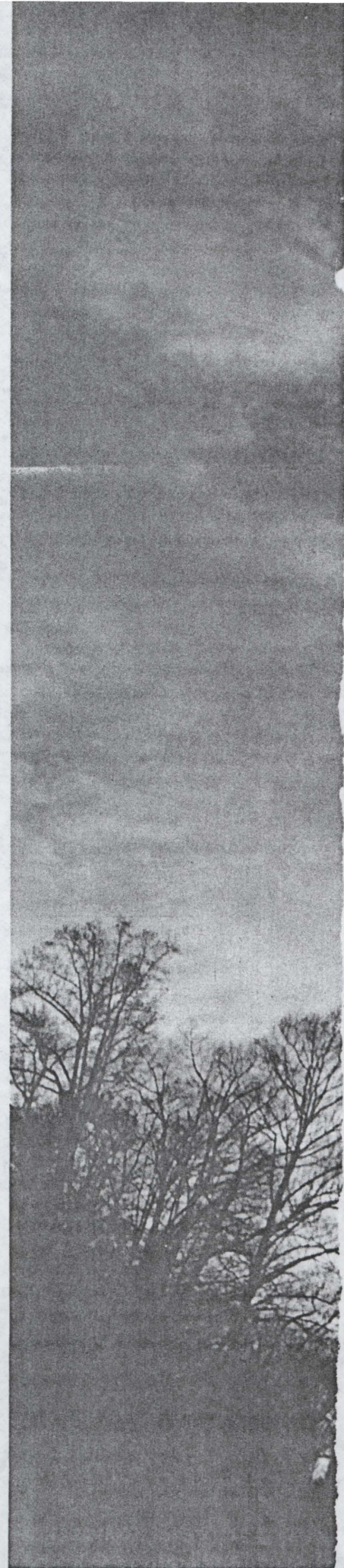
His shoulders climbed up a little inside his sports coat; his body twitched and tingled as if electricity ran through all his arteries and veins. He balled his fists. No, today he'd stride down the marble corridor, work all day; when he went to the water cooler and the Xerox machine, he'd stare everyone straight in the eye.

Now everyone pooled outside the elevators and waited, some looking at their newspapers, some at the wall, some down at the artificial light glaring off the waxed floor. The click-click-click of a woman's heels tore apart the silence and bounced off the walls. He heard himself begin to breathe harder. Everyone else seemed in a trance. Three men formed a circle and began to talk quietly. He glanced at his wristwatch, not because it could be anything except one minute after 8, but because it occupied his . . .

A burst of laughter from the three men interrupted his thoughts; the tallest one glanced at him. *Why did they laugh? Did they know?*

They pressed into the elevator, two men exchanged nods, a third reached into his pocket and rubbed two coins. In the stillness, everyone listened to the coins. A man

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crushed against him, chest against shoulder. Instead of at least nodding to him, as two men must who are pressed so unnaturally close, the man only stared past his ear. *Why WON'T he look at me? Does he know?*

The elevator stopped at 5. Bodies jostled past him. The doors shut. He heard himself breathing even harder; perhaps they were all listening to him, now that the man with the two coins was gone.

You've got to stop, he told himself, come on. Every man in this elevator has a secret, every man in this building; none can truly be what they are from 8 to 4.

The light flashed 8, the elevator stopped, the doors whisked open, a briefcase jabbed him, his kneecaps locked—how could any of their secrets be so terrible as his?

ONE FRIDAY EVENING AFTER HIS LAW CLASSES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BALTIMORE WERE FINISHED—it was 1973 or 1974, he's not sure which—Mike Shea climbed inside his green Volkswagen Beetle and began the hour drive to his old home town. He was an unmarried Vietnam vet who had lived in the rural Maryland town of Olney during his high school years, and he had a 7 o'clock appointment at a bar there to meet an old friend about a summer job. Compulsively, he looked at his wristwatch; he had left early because he hated being late.

He always took the scenic ride, Rte. 108, because he loved rising and dipping through the hollows, clattering over the little bridges, gazing across the rolling farmland. Law books and wristwatches were what he imposed on his life to keep in check his urge to roll and dip and dream.

And yet, that night—for some reason he couldn't fathom—he kept riding Rte. 40/Interstate 70 far longer than he usually did. Twice he approached roads that cut over to Rte. 108, twice he told himself to take them—and twice he watched them pass by, muttering to himself, "Why did I do that? This is stupid." Another thing he noticed: Rte. 40 seemed unusually free of traffic. It was rush hour on a busy road, and Mike Shea was all alone.

About 15 miles outside Baltimore, he looked off to his left. And looked again. A powerful beam of light cut the night sky and fell upon a barn 50 yards from his car. Hovering up there was something huge that he could not quite see, something with a ring of alternating red and yellow lights unlike any he'd ever seen on any aircraft. He leaned toward his open window—soundless, absolutely soundless out there. Helicopter? Hell, he'd lived with helicopters chopping up night skies for a year in Vietnam—that was no goddam helicopter. In his belly he first felt the fear, then in a slow crawl up his torso.

The beam of light died. His eyes flickered from the road back up to the thing. My God, this cannot be, he thought, things like this don't exist; if only he could hear some small mechanical whisper . . . But now it was moving closer to him and the fear became a rush through his arms and legs, his ankles and wrists and fingers. Now it was nearly overhead and his hands were choking the steering wheel, his shoulders hunched down as if he could make himself small.

Get cover! his mind screamed. Crawl under the car! But the car is moving 60 miles an hour! One last time he tried to crane his neck and see, but now his whole body was bolt-locked, all his senses overwhelmed, and like a small boy in the dark who thinks that if he closes his eyes he will make himself go away, he stared straight ahead into the milky cove of his headlights.

At the very top of his back, he felt something. Like a mild current of electricity, or someone pouring frigid water down his spine. And then . . .

. . . and then he was driving in his car again, feeling quite relaxed, approaching Olney. He saw the bar up ahead, pulled in and parked.

Inside, he peered around for his friend, ordered a beer and waited. "Hey," he called to the bartender, "where is he? He said he'd be here at 7."

"He was."

"What do you mean?"

"Look at the clock."

Mike stared at it. Nine p.m. Impossible.

"It's 9 o'clock?"

The bartender nodded and pushed the beer in front of him. Mike walked it to the window and looked outside at the night. What—? Flat tire? No, he would've remembered that. Break-down? Traffic jam? Impossible, impossible. He felt it again in his stomach. *Something* had terrified him on that road. But he remembered nothing.

He took a sip of beer and glanced around the room. In a bar, with a cold drink and a lit cigarette and a mate to swap stories with, he felt completely at home. He heard a burst of laughter and recognized a few people at one of the tables—he could slide in with them. He looked at the clock again, then outside again into the dark, shut his eyes and strained to find the logic.

All at once, without knowing why, he felt depressed. He set down his beer and walked out. He left his home town without a hello and drove back to Baltimore on Rte. 108.

A DECADE PASSED, AND SO DID THE RTE. 40 TERROR. HE made sure not to drive that road again, and never quite knew why. Then he moved on to a job and wife and child and house on the northern edge of Washington: What memory is a match for motion?

His little girl he referred to as "the Redhead," a blue-eyed, freckled, grinning incarnation of his love for Ireland, the country where all his great-grandparents were born. He loved to tell stories of her precociousness, mimicking her pipsqueak voice and shaking his head over the way she ran to hug him each evening when he picked her up at day care. "I don't quite trust her—I think she's a BS artist like her father," he'd joke. But no, with Mike it wasn't quite a joke. He had a habit, even with her in his arms, of looking over happiness' shoulder to see what lurked behind. Often he seemed tense. Some people enjoyed his intensity, others felt uneasy. He took medication for high blood pressure, antacid pills for his stomach.

As he came to his late thirties, a consciousness gripped him that he had finished pouring all the concrete in his life, that all his walls were dried and hardened, all his choices chosen. Sometimes he threw himself against the walls—marriage, office job, subway ride, suburban house—and other times, when the walls echoed with the Redhead's laughter, he thanked God he had built them.

At home, people relished his New York cabbie and Marlon Brando impressions—"I coulda been a contendah"—his gifts of rapier repartee and vivid storytelling. His hands swept the air when he described an Irish seacoast vista, his rich voice boomed out words such as *panoply, terrain, azure*.

At work, when others grouped around a cafeteria table during lunch, he read the paper and ate tuna salad or sandwiches alone in his office. An emotional man in a government building sends off signals like a siren—that was why, one by one, he had identified his vulnerabilities at work and begun to eliminate them. He no longer looked for buddies or promotions there, nor called out hearty hellos to people who barely mumbled back. In section meetings, he never said a word. Why struggle and kick against it all? Why rub all the right backs just to climb the ladder? Button up, sit down, knock it out.

One day in 1985, at the age of 40, he found himself in a bookstore during his lunch break. A book about UFOs caught his eye. He had no special interest in the subject, but he liked mysteries, and the title—*Missing Time*—intrigued him.

Over a sandwich at his desk, he began to read. And then he reached page 42.

I used to have a girlfriend . . . and I used to drive from Baltimore . . . to Frederick, Maryland. I would take Route 40 west, and for, I'd say, at least 10 or 15 miles of that road, it was very, very deserted . . . And, uh, about, I'd say probably a year after I was seeing her, I was driving along the road . . . I felt very strange for some reason. I didn't know why . . . It's possible, of course, that I'm mistaken, but there's something about it that I've never quite understood, and I don't even know what—what questions to ask to find what answer I'm looking for . . .

The young man, who couldn't remember what had occurred to him, had then agreed to undergo hypnosis. In a light trance, the veil had lifted, and he told what he saw happening that night on the road.

Mike stopped reading and closed his eyes. He opened them, rubbed them, stared at his office wall. Oh God. He read through the passage, then read it again. *Oh God.*

Dread swept his body, fragments of memory flashed and vanished in his head. What could have made those two hours that night simply disappear? He shut the book, opened a manila folder and pushed his eyes across one of the medical case histories on his desk. Chondromalacia, myocardial infarction, code 38 C.F.R. § 3.102. *Aliens.*

Oh God.

HE FELT LIKE A FOOL, BUT he could not seal this. He *had* to tell someone that afternoon at work. He waved Pete Storey, one of his two bosses and an old pal, into his office. "You swear to tell no one, Pete?" he said in a near whisper.

"Sure."

"God, I know this is going to sound like gonzo stuff, but . . ."

He held his breath and waited for the ridicule, exhaling slowly when none came. In the days that followed, they'd discuss some new fact Mike had remembered or learned—breaking off in mid-sentence at the rattle of a doorknob.

Had some psychological disorder caused him to lose the two hours and feel the terror? If it had, shouldn't he find out? Or had something real happened he could not quite reach with memory? Could it happen again? How could he, a government lawyer, walk into a psychologist's office and request hypnosis to jog his memory—to *ascertain, sir, if I have been abducted by aliens?*

He could forget it for a while. He could jog and shower and read the morning paper and drop his daughter at day care and tuck her lunch in the little bin and ride the silent elevator and nod to colleagues and dictate into a Dictaphone like other responsible men in Washington did. But only for a while; he was not one of the mortar-and-brick men. Apprehension always seemed to penetrate the walls he built; anxiety seeped through his voice, colored his cheeks and flashed in his blue eyes. Sometimes just a small tap on his brickwork, an innocent joke about him at a party, could cause the walls to crumble, and then he'd stalk off alone to smoke a cigarette outside until he cooled.

"You're a government lawyer?" a man at a party once asked.

"You sure don't seem like one." More like a former boxer, perhaps, or a writer or an innkeeper slapping down a mug of ale in front of a guest and asking how his day had passed.

He tacked Irish posters onto his walls at the office and home; on cold days he wore thick sweaters or Donegal tweed coats he'd bought on his five trips to Ireland. He seemed to be the only one in his neighborhood who would stand by the curb clutching a beer in one hand and his little girl in the other in case someone chanced by to chat. He longed for the sense of belonging he had felt in working-class village pubs in Ireland, but he lived in an upper-middle-class neighborhood in the suburbs of D.C.

He had entered law school after Vietnam with the fancy of becoming an FBI agent and ended up working 8 to 4 every day in a 12-story building reviewing claims against the government, writing legal decisions. Perhaps it was better this way: codes, regulations, restraint. Life was complicated enough without his passions and dreams spilling over into his work; he could save them for 5 minutes after 4. Still, there was something too impatient, too impulsive in him for 38 C.F.R. § 3.102. Once, eager

to see something on TV, he rushed toward it, tripped over a toy and opened a gash in his face. "Get stitches!" urged his wife. Mike refused; scars were romantic. A shame it wasn't one that took a nick out of a guy's eyebrow—those had always been his favorite scars of all.

He sensed he needed someone in his life to keep it ordered. Wasn't that why he had been drawn to Anne, a Germanic woman who refused to buy a dining-room set for three years until she found the ball-and-claw English mahogany one she wanted? A dinner at the Sheas was Anne's crisply folded napkins, perfectly aligned silverware and careful rotation of each dish . . . and Mike's *hey, make yourself at home, sure, snag that baked potato with your hand if it's not too hot . . .*



Mike's daughter, "the Redhead," is a grinning incarnation of Ireland.

Now that the long-buried memory had been stirred by the book, night skies that had once awed him began to trouble him, quiet moments made the possibilities swirl through his head. Sometimes, when he was very busy, he thought the pace of his life could help him run past this, leave it behind like a pothole that had shaken his alignment but not ruined his car. Another voice kept insisting: Go back and stare at it; don't be afraid.

His manhood, he had tested that before. At 18, awash with the romance of the sea—freighters bound for Singapore, stops in Hong Kong and Malaysia—he had signed up for a summer on a fishing boat in the North Atlantic. Quickly came the reality: no women, no showers, no diversion for weeks. No more illusions about the sea.

A few years later, he had dropped out of college. School's boring, I want to know what war is, he remembered thinking. A few weeks after he arrived in Vietnam, he knew. War was being curled up quivering in a hole in the mud, praying that he'd give up sex and alcohol and never ask for anything again, if God would just get him through this shelling.

No, he had to act now. Flipping back through *Missing Time*

one day, he noticed an acknowledgment in the front in which the author, Budd Hopkins, a New York sculptor and painter, thanked a man named David Webb. Wait, he knew that name—wasn't Webb the astronomer who was an old friend of Anne's? He called Webb and from him received the phone number of a physicist who was the Washington-area contact for people with UFO experiences. Mike sucked up his courage and dialed the physicist; three times he left messages with the man's wife and received no return call.

At last the physicist telephoned, and Mike let out his story like a whoosh of air. The physicist only seemed interested in obtaining evidence he might measure or see, not the wisp of memory in Mike's mind. Perhaps, said the man, you have a chemical imbalance. Mike heard himself stammer an apology for taking the man's time, said goodbye and hung up.

Next, he was given the name of a good psychologist who might hypnotize him. He braced himself, called the man and tried to put it all into words. "Excuse me," the psychologist interrupted, "you've got a problem, and we'll work it out after you've made an appointment with my secretary." Mike all but slammed down the phone.

Weeks passed. He tried to drug it with routine, but the thing squirmed and kicked too hard now. This time he selected a female psychiatrist—perhaps a woman would have more empathy. She shook her head kindly. "I won't put you under hypnosis," she said, "because even if you told me you had an experience with a UFO, I wouldn't believe you."

A piece of himself was missing; if no one helped him find it, how could he ever make himself whole? How could he feel in control? Months of quiet desperation—that's how he described them after the fragments of memory began to return, but sometimes it was not quiet at all. Once, when he and his wife were playing Trivial Pursuit with another couple, he became incensed over a ruling, shouted, threw up his arms and stomped upstairs to bed. "Mike's going through a very difficult time right now," Anne told them. "You'll understand later."

Anne tried her best to comfort him. "Whether it happened or not," she said, "is it really that important? Can't you just let it go?"

Let it go? He came from a family of seven children whose intensity made a new in-law step back as if from an opened kiln, people who could, while clearing dinner dishes, pass two hours analyzing the latest turmoil in their lives and then two more analyzing why they analyzed. *Let it go?*

"You can't understand!" he snapped at his wife. "Goddamit, it didn't happen to you. I want an answer."

He called David Webb again. "You have to get me a meeting with Budd Hopkins. I need to undergo hypnosis so I can remember," he said. "You *have* to . . ."

I'M THERE. AND, UM, I'M DEEPER THAN I THINK I'VE BEEN, I'm relaxed, but I'm looking and getting nothing. I'm looking, I'm peering. I don't even want to talk. Let me look . . . I'm getting an enormously powerful light concentrated in a kind of a star on the rear window . . . I know somehow this is not from a car . . . Concentrated almost in a pinpoint on the rear window . . . I have a feeling something's coming up on me. I can't really describe, I just have this feeling it's coming up on me, it's bigger. Oh jeez, the damn thing . . . it comes up behind me and goes off to the right . . . I'm starting to get that feeling, like chills. Is that a car? One light, why one light? . . . I'm starting to get that tingling. That's what scares me. How the hell can a motorcycle move that fast? . . . This thing is elevated, it's not on the road . . . This doesn't make sense. It's not a chopper . . . The barn, furiously lit up. Bright as day. It's off to the left . . . And I don't have any sense of transition from the ship being over the barn and moving across the road to me . . . but on the other hand . . . I was so crawling inward, I was terrified to look—oh, that's it. I refused to look that way. I will not

look that way . . . I'm scared to death, because now I know that I know what it is, I mean, I know it's not a helicopter . . . and that's why I don't look, don't look . . . look into the headlights . . . don't look and keep driving . . . I have no fear now . . . I see those guys standing by the side of the road; they look powerful to me and I feel absolutely no threat from them . . . It's sort of like a bunch of guys who knew each other getting together . . . I'm glad to see them . . . I have a very distinct feeling there's four . . . in black, like a plastic armor . . . I see faces peering in at me . . . It's those black faces . . . He has the most interesting helmet. It's—no . . . He looks like a damn grasshopper . . . There's a line down the middle of the helmet that comes out to a point . . . Three of them are bigger, they're dumber, I mean, they're workhorses . . . long arms, bowed legs . . . simian-like . . . The fourth one, the one I'm fond of, is really in charge; he's older, he's smaller, he's ancient . . . I'm not afraid. I'm actually kind of contemptuous of the other three . . . I seem to be very passive, very dazed . . . It's like they're following orders to get me out of the car . . . I feel myself stepping out, and that light is above me . . . That craft is very close to me . . . I'm starting to hear a low whir . . . I'm kind of an automaton . . . I'm following orders . . . I'm doing an awful lot of trembling right now, physically . . . The feeling is, that I'm not me . . . No, somebody's got . . . There's two craft, the smaller one and the one that's hovering above me . . . My arms started to freeze . . . He just walked up to me. He's smaller, he's ancient, he's kind . . . He's in black, and he's got one of those silky looking little suits on . . . a zipper up the front . . . I'm getting the feeling of a human face behind the mask . . .

ON SATURDAY NIGHT OVER DINNER IN A GREENWICH VILLAGE restaurant, a few hours after the hypnosis session with Budd Hopkins, it found him. The fearfulness and enormity of what had tumbled out of him that day under a light trance on a pullout bed in Hopkins' art studio ran through him; he stopped eating and stiffened. His dinner partners saw it in his eyes and walked him back to Hopkins' house, to get some sleep. He couldn't sleep. He kept the lights on all night, felt his eyes darting round and round his sockets, peering at the artist's massive sculptures cloaked in brooding sheets.

Out of here. I've got to get out of here, he thought. Out of New York City, where men dress like women and lunatics rub shoulders with businessmen and people nod their heads, yes, yes, when you tell them that, under hypnosis, you've seen bow-legged, simian-like, armor-wearing creatures take you into a spacecraft and lay you on a table and collect samples from your body. Out of New York City. Back down the railroad tracks to a three-bedroom house, a picket fence, a morning jog, a family, a necktie, an elevator, a Dictaphone, a 38 C.F.R. § 3.102: *Washington*. He boarded the noon Metroliner, shoved it clean out of his head . . .

It had to have happened; I could never in a million years have invented all those details, said the dreamer in him.

Prove it wasn't a dream, argued the lawyer in him. The burden of proof lies with you.

(Next stop, NEW-ark, New Jersey! said the conductor.)

I've remembered dreams before; you don't *feel* this way about a dream, said the dreamer. You saw me sobbing during that one part; I never cry in public.

Power of suggestion, a clear-cut case, said the lawyer. You read that silly book—

But what happened in the book wasn't what I saw happening to me under hypnosis, said the dreamer. It was different. I didn't make those things up, I saw them happening to me in my mind, they just flowed from me, I could hardly keep up.

In your mind, you say, said the lawyer.

(Next stop, Phil-a-DEL-phi-aaaa, Pennsylvania! said the conductor.)

Let us consider your mind, said the lawyer. What evidence do

we have that this isn't just some psychological disorder?

How could what I see under hypnosis fit the patterns of what so many other people see? said the dreamer. There's a consistency of detail emerging in case after case, specifics that Hopkins purposely omitted from the book in order to verify truthfulness, precise shapes and colors and experiences shared by people who've never met, even people from different continents. How could we all be hallucinating the same thing, over and over?

How could scores of poor shepherd girls over the centuries swear they had seen the Virgin Mary? said the lawyer.

I object! said the dreamer.

(Next stop, WIL-ming-ton, Delaware! said the conductor.)

This man Hopkins who hypnotized you, said the lawyer. An accomplished artist, a published author, a well-known man. He invites you into his home in New York, sympathizes with you, gives you a bed to sleep in, and, of course, you want to please him.

Now wait, I had no choice but him, where else could I go? said the dreamer. What government office do you take this to, what social service clinic, what private psychologist?

(Next stop, Bal-ti-mooooore, Maryland! said the conductor.)

And wouldn't you admit that since the time you were a teen-ager, you've rarely felt completely at ease? said the lawyer.

That's irrelevant! said the dreamer.

Who knows, perhaps subconsciously you need this, said the lawyer.

I don't need it, I don't want it, I can't afford it! I want to be like everyone else! said the dreamer.

You are a Vietnam vet, am I correct? said the lawyer. Perhaps what you experienced was a flashback of a—

—all the choppers were on our side, I tell you! I never associated them with fear.

(Next stop, Newww Car-rollton! said the conductor.)

After all, said the lawyer, we all know how soldiers in Vietnam used—

—a little marijuana, that's all, I never took any hallucinatory drugs!

Face it, said the lawyer, any rational man aboard a spacecraft would grab a loose instrument, a utensil, a piece of food, some object from another world we all could touch and test to prove to us that—

I wasn't functioning under my control, I tell you! said the dreamer. They manipulate your emotions, they make you feel like a good little doggie on the veterinarian's table.

(Next stop, Wash-ing-ton, D.C.! said the conductor.)

Come now, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, said the lawyer. I rest my case. We have no evidence. You've heard the man. Can you honestly, rationally believe that this man was taken aboard a spacecraft by bowlegged, simian-like, armor-wearing creatures?

(In three minutes we will be arriving at Union Station, Washington, D.C., said the conductor.)

He's right, said the dreamer.

What's that? said the lawyer.

He's right, he's absolutely right, said Mike Shea. It's not a dream, but whatever it is, I refuse to believe it. It's not possible, it's not acceptable, it's not logical.

(Wash-ing-ton! Last stop, watch your step getting off! Wash-ing-ton!)

ALIENS? ANNE SHEA WORKED OUT HER PUZZLES USING ONLY the pieces placed in front of her. That Sunday night, when Mike returned from New York and told her the details of the weekend's hypnosis session, she asked a few questions, nodded, gave him a hug and then swept it from her head. She was perhaps the most pragmatic woman her husband had ever met. She sympathized with him, supported him, even accepted the possibility. But unless it was a problem she could see and touch and solve, unless the doorbell rang and there they stood . . .

One by one, he informed his brothers, sisters and parents. One scoffed, another wondered if, that night on Rte. 40, he'd been drinking. Most of them took it down as well as he could expect, with a hard gulp and then a sympathetic, baffled look.

He sealed his secret, resumed his life. Four months passed. A grenade had been rolled beneath his polyester office swivel chair and there he sat, reviewing and dictating. And then he could no longer ignore it. "I feel like a guy," he said, "who finds out he's not his parents' child." He needed to know more, to go where people understood. Where else could he go but back to Budd Hopkins, the country's foremost researcher on alien "abductions"? And so he did, returning to New York for a weekend once every few months. Sometimes he'd attend Saturday-night get-togethers Hopkins held for those who had memories similar to Mike's. A growing group of people had written to Hopkins out of desperation. Like rape victims, they felt violated and vulnerable.

"When people come up behind me," said one young woman at a party Mike attended, "even people I'm very fond of, I could kill them. It's an immediate adrenaline rush. And I wonder, why do I act this way? Always ready to turn around and fight, or run away. Always aware of who's coming into a room, who's going out, patrolling the area. And I realize, it all comes back to *this*."

This was not a single wrenching night. Most of the people Hopkins investigated told of experiences that began when they were young children and occurred periodically throughout their lives, as if the aliens—whether creatures of physical or psychological reality—were tracking them the way naturalists tagged and tracked a deer or a migratory bird. Some consciously recalled the encounters, but most only remembered them clearly under hypnosis, leading Hopkins to believe the visitors could induce amnesia in their subjects before returning them to their normal lives. Some "abductions" occurred in groups, several people corroborating the experience. Other times, according to Hopkins' interpretation, aliens seemed capable of "switching off" witnesses and plucking the individual they were seeking, returning everyone to normal consciousness when their task was done.

'In my country, Mike,'
said a friend born in India,
'we would look
upon you as someone
very fortunate and
special. But in America,
people only will think you
are crazy.'

Their task? Not to harm humans, he said. In case after case, "abductees" were reporting the same ritual: an examination inside a round room within the craft, and then a taking of reproductive material. Several women even reported testing positive for pregnancy, and then, after a missing-time experience and without a single sign of miscarriage, being informed by their obstetricians that their wombs no longer contained a fetus. Many under hypnosis recalled being presented a child, a hybrid that seemed half like themselves, and half like the large-headed, bald, thin, short, grayish-white creatures most of them reported seeing. That led Hopkins to surmise that intellectually superior but physically weaker and emotionally sterile visitors could be cross-breeding with humans in quest of a genetic trait they needed to survive.

Preposterous, said the debunkers. Those tiny scars on the "abductees" weren't from aliens' scalpels, they were from forgotten childhood wounds. That odd circle of scorched earth in one "abductee's" backyard, where no living thing would grow, was caused not by a spacecraft landing, but by a fungus.

A blind study of nine "abductees" was done by a psychologist who had no knowledge of their alleged UFO experiences. None of them, said Dr. Elizabeth Slater, showed signs of mental disorder. "To summarize," she wrote, "while this is a heterogeneous group in terms of overt personality style, it can be said that most of its members share being rather unusual and very interesting. They also share brighter than average intelligence and a certain richness of inner life that can operate either favorably in terms of creativity or disadvantageously to the extent that it can be overwhelming. Shared underlying emotional factors include a degree of identity disturbance, some deficits in the interpersonal sphere and generally mild paranoid phenomena (hyper-sensitivity, wariness, etc.)."

Aha! said the believers. Exactly the kind of psychological scars you might expect from a person who had been abducted repeatedly.

Aha! said the disbelievers. Exactly the kind of person who would have a need to subconsciously create such an experience.

Mike, too, now began recalling encounters going back to his childhood; conscious memories that had always confused him began to be explained. Why had he always been afraid to go into attics, even to inspect the damage done to his house by a fallen tree? In a hypnotic recollection, he told of being given a silver sphere by the aliens and hiding it in his attic as a boy. He consciously remembered his French tutor screaming at him once for arriving at a lesson hours late, and himself staring in humiliated disbelief at the clock. He *knew* he'd left home in time. Under hypnosis, he saw himself meeting the aliens in the woods on the way to the tutor's house. Another time, under hypnosis, he remembered seeing some symbols on a piece of paper aboard the craft. The ones he drew were nearly identical to symbols other "abductees" had remembered and drawn.

After the New York sessions, he would ride the train back to Washington and search for explanations. Could we lead alternate existences of which only a few ever became aware? Could there be a stage of existence between dream and reality? Or could a small chemical change in a man's brain make him see unexplainable things—*identical* to what others saw?

Why did people scoff—was reality determined by majority vote? How close to its edge did all of us walk?

Back in his own house after one trip, he hugged the Redhead to his chest. So full of laughter, simplicity and trust, so full of what he yearned to be. And yet . . .

That weekend, under hypnosis, he had recalled himself and the small, ancient alien with the human face beneath the black helmet—the one he saw in most of his encounters—walking arm in arm into his little girl's bedroom and gazing down as she slept. The alien had seemed pleased with her, as if she too figured in their plans. Was she, like many of the children of the

"abducted" that Hopkins wrote about, soon to become an "abductee" too?

His daughter seemed unaware of such things; he listened closely every time she told a tale of "make-believe." If you are real, he found himself whispering one night alone in bed, please, do what you will with me, but leave her out of this. Please, please . . .

His eyes opened wide. No, she is safe, and my life is still in my control, as long as I do not believe. No evidence, evidence, evidence . . .

And yet, he believed in God . . .

ONE DAY LAST SPRING, BUDD HOPKINS CALLED. HE WAS about to do three radio and two television interviews in Washington to publicize the release of his new book, *Intruders*. Would Mike accompany him, to lend him credence?

No, no thank you, sorry, Budd. Hell, that's all he needed. An artist in New York, an entertainer in Los Angeles—they could be different, it made them intriguing. Not a government lawyer in Washington.

Still, he didn't like himself for saying no. Talking in whispers to a colleague at work, hiding it from good friends made him feel small and weak and cowardly. To keep a secret about himself from people was to be their prisoner. To live with a lie took a cautious, calculating man, one who monitored his words, compartmentalized his life. Already, trying to explain to friends the weekend trips to New York without his wife, he felt uneasy and ashamed. Guilt and doubt caused by his secret kept making him flare over trivialities.

Go public, confess it, he thought.

No! Think of the reactions—the silent elevator, the water cooler, the men's room, the Xerox machine, the bulletin board, the hallway . . .

Go public, say it into the cameras instead of a human face. Far easier and more credible on Channel 5 and CBS Radio than walking up to everyone he knew, clearing his throat and stammering, uh, I've been meaning to tell you, I may have been, well, abducted a number of times by aliens—that is, I don't believe it, of course, but . . .

My whole life could be ruined.

How much more could it hurt to let it out than to keep it in? Go on, tell the world, and the agony will end.

His wife folded her arms and shook her head. Other people in our neighborhood get publicized for community service, she said, or how they raise their children and have two dynamite careers. Mike, you just don't talk about things like this in Washington . . .

The night before the interviews, he couldn't sleep. He rose and felt nauseated. Why had he consented? Not one public confession—*five*. He couldn't jog, he couldn't eat. It was like Nam, like the North Atlantic fishing boat: How did he get himself into these things?

He did the interviews, emphasizing over and over that he still didn't believe it had happened to him, but that was what he had remembered under hypnosis. He went home that evening emotionally frayed and stared at the framed photographs of Irish grandmothers and great-grandfathers that eyed him from his dresser. What would they have thought of this? He crawled into bed and stared at the ceiling. Tomorrow he would walk onto the eighth floor—and *everyone* would know.

EIGHT A.M. THE NEXT DAY. UP THE SILENT ELEVATOR. DOES he know? Does she know? Do they know?

He walked out of the elevator, down the hall, straight to his office. He knew the unwritten code here: No one said much about your work, but your personal life was fair game.

He ran his tongue across the dryness of his mouth and lit a cigarette. He slid behind his desk and set to work. No trip to the

cafeteria or men's room or water cooler unless it's a must. No lingering in the hall. No poking his head into other offices to say hello.

Chondromalacia, myocardial infarction, code 38 C.F.R. § 3.102.

Oh God. What are they thinking?

One day passed, two days, three. Not a word uttered, not an eyebrow arched. Maybe he had gotten away with it, he thought, his spirits soaring. But no, wait—hadn't he done it so they *would* know? Or was this what he dreaded most, the Caucasian corporate male conspiracy of silence? Oh yes, he had had that number pulled on him before. People as polite and proper as a monogrammed thank-you note could disembowel you when you turned your back. Like that time he applied for a judgeship at a different agency, a big promotion, and asked a man at work for a recommendation. Certainly, said the man, who courteously gored him.

Perhaps he was just imagining things. He worried too much what other people thought. Of course he did. He was altogether too sensitive. Why else did office pranksters prey on him, leaving notes like "Mike, come see me" and signing the boss' name, then snickering as he fretted and fumed?

A week of silence passed. Unbearable this was, a strip-tease before an audience of mutes. He asked his friend Pete to be his ears, to bring back any scrap. Bit by bit, the feedback came.

"Mike Shea was just a normal guy. And then one night he took a ride. Do-do-do-do, do-do-do-do." That was the theme song from "The Twilight Zone."

"Hey, hear you've got ALF [a Muppet-like alien character] in your section."

"God, that was stupid of him to admit. Imagine how that's going to go down in the front office . . ."

The higher up the story was told, the sillier it sounded. The finer the material on the teller's torso and the more important the sheaf of documents in the listener's briefcase, the more oddly it seemed to vibrate off the larynx, the more peculiarly it drummed inside the ear. Might it even bode poorly for one's career to be linked with him?

"Hey, what the hell's going on with Shea?" one of his bosses finally asked his friend Pete. "What's all this I hear about UFOs?"

"He's approaching it as a skeptic," said Pete. "He doesn't actually believe he was on a spacecraft . . ."

"Him just being associated with it isn't a good idea. Going public with it doesn't show the best of judgment."

Each report that came back to him made him flinch. And then, on the escalator into the subway, he'd think: This thing is so utterly fantastic—no, beyond fantastic, *ridiculous*—how could he get angry at anyone for feeling that way when he felt that way himself? What did he expect the poor guys to say as they stood in the elevator staring at the flashing floor lights?

At last someone spoke to Mike directly. "Hey, what's this about you taking a trip around the Milky Way?" a colleague demanded.

Mike's face flushed. "Did you see the show?"

"No, but . . ."

"Then how the hell can you say that? If you saw the show, you'd know that wasn't what I said at all."

An unexpected thing happened. A female attorney said, "God, it's so exciting. I think it's terrific, Mike."

A cloud passed over his eyes. It wasn't like a ride in the Space Shuttle, it wasn't terrific—she didn't comprehend either. Back in his office, he pressed his face to his hands and rubbed his eyes. The step he had taken to remove the weight—how could it have doubled it? Was there *any* way for him—or the people around him—to exit this wilderness? If they believed he had traveled in a spaceship, it irritated him—he didn't believe it. If they dismissed it completely, he felt embarrassed and angry. If they said nothing at all, it maddened him because then he had to worry what they thought.

Maybe what he sought was what everyone sought, even the five billion others whose heavens held only airplanes, birds, planets and stars. People to touch him and say, *Don't worry, you're okay.*

All his social relationships became complicated now. All the people he knew became measured by their ability to handle this part of his life; friendships he might have otherwise enjoyed had to be put to a test. Every few weeks, he invited a couple to the house and popped in the video of his TV interviews. One man watched it carefully, then never said a single word. One couple was fascinated and peppered him with questions. Another man said, "You know, Mike, if I didn't know you better, I'd think you had a real problem."

"In my country, Mike," said a friend born in India, "we would look upon you as someone very fortunate and special. You have seen something extraordinary from the heavens, perhaps supernatural. But in America, people only will think you are crazy."

YOU BELIEVE IN UFOs

Many Washingtonians, like millions of other Americans, think they could one day encounter visitors from outer space. Nearly half of area residents say that unidentified flying objects are real. However, only 10 percent say they have actually seen an object they thought was a UFO.

When polled on these questions, 46 percent of those asked said that UFOs are something real and only 33 percent said they are imaginary; 21 percent didn't know or had no opinion on UFOs.

These figures coincide with what the rest of the country believes about UFOs. In a Gallup poll in March 1987, 49 percent of those surveyed said they believed UFOs were real; 30 percent said they were imaginary; 21 percent didn't know. That survey also indicated that the people most likely to believe in the existence of UFOs are college-educated men, younger than 50, living in the West or the East.

The poll of Washington area residents was conducted by The Washington Post on December 11, 12 and 13, and involved a random survey of 436 adults in the District of Columbia, Maryland and Northern Virginia. □

ONE DAY, NOT LONG AGO, MIKE STEPPED INTO THE elevator to go get a tuna salad. Another lawyer entered, the doors closed. Time, and the mere act of confession, had helped to calm him; looking back, he sometimes thought, maybe people hadn't handled it that badly . . .

"Mike," the lawyer said, "I know it's been a while—"

He tightened and felt his shoulders climbing.

"—and I don't want to pull your chain—"

Oh God, here it comes, here it comes.

"—but last night, something very odd happened. I was lying on my couch and looked out the window and saw this low, powerful light in the sky, but I'm sure it wasn't a helicopter, and we're nowhere near an airport, and all the cats and dogs were howling. I don't know. Something about it just bothers me . . ."

Mike looked into the lawyer's eyes—the lawyer wasn't joking! He resisted an urge to hug the man, to shout "Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!" until it echoed up the elevator shaft, bounced through all the marbled halls, past the Xerox machine, by the bulletin board, around and around the water cooler . . . ■