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## THE SISTERHOOD OF NIGHT

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### WHAT WE KNOW

In an atmosphere of furious accusation and hysterical rumor, an atmosphere in which hearsay and gossip have so thoroughly replaced the careful assessment of evidence that impartiality itself seems of the devil's party, it may be useful to adopt a calmer tone and to state what it is that we actually know. We know that the girls are between twelve and fifteen years old. We know that they travel in bands of five or six, although smaller and larger bands, ranging from two to nine, have occasionally been sighted. We know that they leave and return only at night. We know that they seek dark and secret places, such as abandoned houses, church cellars, graveyards, and the woods at the north end of town. We know, or believe we know, that they have taken a vow of silence.

## WHAT WE SAY

It is said that the girls remove their shirts and dance wild dances under the summer moon. It is said that the girls paint their breasts with snakes and strange symbols. They excite one another by brushing their breasts against the breasts of other girls, it is said. We hear that the girls drink the warm blood of murdered animals. People say that the girls engage in witchcraft, in unnatural sexual acts, in torture, in black magic, in disgusting acts of desecration. Older girls, it is said, lure young girls into the sisterhood and corrupt them. Rumor has it that the girls are instructed to carry weapons: pins, scissors, jackknives, needles, kitchen knives. It is said that the girls have vowed to kill any member who attempts to leave the sisterhood. We have heard that the girls drink a whitish liquid that makes them fall into an erotic frenzy.

## THE CONFESSION OF EMILY GEHRING

Rumors of a secret society had reached us from time to time, but we paid little attention to them until the confession of thirteen-year-old Emily Gehring, who on June 2 released to the *Town Reporter* a disturbing letter. In it she stated that on May 14, at 4:00 P.M., she had been contacted on the playground of David Johnson Junior High by Mary Warren, a high school sophomore who sometimes played basketball with the younger girls. Mary Warren slipped into her hand a small piece of white paper, folded in half. When Emily Gehring opened it, she saw that one of the inner sides was entirely black. Emily felt excited and frightened, for

this was the sign of the Sisterhood of Night, an obscure, impenetrable secret society much discussed on the playgrounds, at the lockers, and in the bathrooms of David Johnson Junior High. She was told to speak to no one and to appear alone at midnight in the parking lot behind the Presbyterian Church. Emily Gehring stated that when she appeared at the parking lot she at first saw no one but was then met by three girls, who had slipped out of hiding places: Mary Warren, Isabel Robbins, and Laura Lindberg. The girls led her through the church parking lot, along quiet roads, and through back yards to the woods at the north end of town, where three other girls met them: Catherine Anderson, Hilda Meyer, and Lavinia Hall. Mary Warren then asked her whether she liked boys. When she said yes, the girls mocked her and laughed at her, as if she had said something stupid. Mary Warren then asked her to remove her shirt. When she refused, the girls threatened to tie her to a tree and stick pins in her. She removed her shirt and the girls all fondled her breasts, touching them and kissing them. She then was invited to touch the breasts of the other girls; when she refused, they seized her hands and forced her to touch them. Some of the girls also touched her "in another place." Mary Warren warned her that if she spoke of this to anyone, she would be punished; at this point Mary Warren displayed a bone-handled kitchen knife. Emily Gehring stated that the girls met every night, at different times and places, in groups of five or six or seven; and she further stated that members of the group were continually changing, and that she was told about other groups meeting in other places. The girls always removed their shirts, fondled and kissed each other, sometimes painted their breasts with snakes and strange symbols, and initiated others into their secret practices. Emily

Gehring remembered, and listed, the names of sixteen girls. By the end of May, according to her statement, she could no longer live with herself, and two days later she delivered to the *Town Reporter* her written confession and urged the town authorities to stop the sisterhood, which was spreading among the girls of David Johnson Junior High like a disease.

#### THE DEFENSE OF MARY WARREN

In response to these charges, which shocked our community, Mary Warren issued a detailed rebuttal that appeared in the *Town Reporter* on June 4. She began by saying that absolute silence was the rule of the sisterhood and that any statement whatever about the group by one of its members was punished by instant expulsion. Nevertheless, the attack by Emily Gehring had convinced her that she must speak out in defense of the sisterhood even at the expense of banishment. She acknowledged that she had contacted Emily Gehring, who had been selected for initiation by a group of "searchers" whom she refused to name; that she had passed Emily Gehring the blackened piece of paper, and had met her, in the presence of two other members, whom she also refused to name, at the back of the Presbyterian Church at midnight and led her into the woods. From this point on, Mary Warren stated, Emily Gehring's report was utterly false, a vicious, hurtful attack the motive for which was all too clear. For Emily Gehring had failed to report that on May 30 she had been expelled from the sisterhood for *violating the vow of silence*. It is not clear from Mary Warren's defense precisely what the vow of silence demanded of a member or how

Emily Gehring violated it, but it is clear, according to her statement, that Emily Gehring was deeply upset by the order of expulsion and threatened to take revenge. Mary Warren then repeated that Emily Gehring's confession was nothing but vicious lies, and she stated that she refused, by reason of her vow, to discuss the sisterhood in any way, except to say that it was a noble, pure society dedicated to silence. She feared that the slander of Emily Gehring had caused harm, and she ended with a passionate plea to the parents of our town to disregard the lies of Emily Gehring and trust their daughters.

#### NIGHT WORRIES

We were of two minds concerning Mary Warren's denial, for if on the one hand we were impressed by her intelligence and grateful to her for giving us grounds for doubting the confession of Emily Gehring, on the other hand her silence about the sisterhood raised doubts of a different kind and tended to undermine the case she was attempting to make. We noted with concern the existence of the group of "searchers," the ritual of the blackened paper, the secret meeting in the woods, the rigorous vow; we wondered, if the girls were innocent, what it was they vowed not to reveal. It was at this time that we began to wake in the night and to ask ourselves how we had failed our daughters. Now reports first began to circulate of bands of girls roaming the night, crossing back yards, moving in the dark; and we began to hear rumors of strange cries, of painted breasts, of wild dances under the summer moon.

## THE DEATH OF LAVINIA HALL

The daughters of our town, many of whom we suspected of being secret members of the sisterhood, now began to seem moody, restless, and irritable. They refused to speak to us, shut themselves in their rooms, demanded that we leave them alone. These moody silences we took as proof of their membership; we hovered, we spied, we breathed down their necks. It was in this tense and oppressive atmosphere that on June 12, ten days after the confession of Emily Gehring, fourteen-year-old Lavinia Hall climbed the two flights of stairs to the guest room in her parents' attic and there, lying down on a puffy comforter sewn by her grandmother, swallowed twenty of her father's sleeping pills. She left no note, but we knew that Lavinia Hall had been named by Emily Gehring as a member of the sisterhood and a participant in their erotic rites. Later it was learned from her parents that the Gehring confession had devastated Lavinia, a quiet, scholarly girl who practiced Czerny exercises and Mozart sonatas on the piano two hours every day after school, kept a diary, and stayed up late at night reading fantasy trilogies with twisting vines on the covers. After Emily Gehring's confession, Lavinia had refused to answer any questions about the sisterhood and had begun to act strangely, shutting herself up in her room for hours at a time and moving around the house restlessly at night. One night at two in the morning her parents heard footsteps in the attic above their bedroom. They climbed the creaking wooden stairs and found Lavinia sitting in her pale-blue pajamas on the moon-striped floor in front of her old dollhouse, which had been moved into the attic at the end of the sixth grade and still contained eight roomfuls of miniature furniture.

Lavinia sat with her arms hugging her raised knees. Her feet were bare. She was strangely still. Her mother remembered one detail: the long forearm, revealed by the pulled-back pajama sleeve. In the dollhouse three little dolls, thick with dust, sat stiffly in the moonlit living room: the child on the cobwebbed couch, the mother on the rocker, the father on the armchair with tiny lace doilies. The parents blamed themselves for not recognizing the seriousness of their daughter's condition, and they condemned the sisterhood as a band of murderers.

THE SECOND CONFESSION  
OF EMILY GEHRING

Scarcely had we begun to suffer the news of the death of Lavinia Hall when Emily Gehring released to the *Town Reporter* a second confession, which angered us and filled us with confusion. For in it she repudiated her earlier confession and, siding with Mary Warren against herself, accused herself of having fabricated the first confession in a spirit of revenge for her expulsion from the sisterhood. Emily Gehring now confessed that on the night of May 14 she had been led into the woods by Mary Warren and two other girls, as she had truthfully reported on June 2, but that "nothing at all" had happened there. Of her initiation she said only that it "consisted of silence"; for the next two weeks she had met nightly with small groups of the sisterhood, during which "not a single word" was uttered by anyone and "nothing at all" took place. On May 30 she was expelled from the sisterhood for violating her vow: she had spoken of the secret society to her friend Susannah Mason,

who in turn had spoken to Bernice Thurman, not knowing that Bernice was a secret member of the sisterhood. Emily Gehring now claimed that she had regretted her false confession from the moment she had given it to the *Town Reporter*, but had been ashamed to admit that she had lied. The death of Lavinia Hall had shocked her into confessing the truth. She took upon herself the blame for Lavinia Hall's death, apologized to the grieving parents, and spoke fervently of the sisterhood as a pure, noble association that had given meaning to her life; and she looked forward to the day when the glorious sisterhood would spread from town to town and take over the world.

#### RESPONSE TO THE SECOND CONFESSION

As might be expected, the second confession thoroughly damaged the credibility of Emily Gehring as a witness, but our doubts, which at first were directed at the confession of June 2, soon turned upon the second confession itself. We noted that Emily Gehring used the very words of Mary Warren to describe the sisterhood; and this coincidence led some of us to argue that Emily Gehring had been persuaded by Mary Warren to retract her confession and take upon herself all blame, in return for reinstatement in the sisterhood or for some other reward we could only guess at. Others noted with distaste the fervent turn at the end, and argued that if Emily Gehring was now telling the truth, then the truth was both incomplete and disturbing. For if in fact the girls were innocent of the original charges, then the nature of the sisterhood remained carefully hidden, while at the same time its troubling power was

revealed by the passion of an Emily Gehring, who couldn't tear herself away. In this view the second confession, while seeming to absolve the sisterhood, to reveal its innocence, in fact demonstrated an even more frightening truth about the secret society: its tenacious grip on the girls, the terrible loyalty it exacted from them.

#### THE TESTIMONY OF DR. ROBERT MEYER

It was during this time of uncertainty and anxiety that new information appeared from an unexpected quarter. Dr. Robert Meyer, a dermatologist with an office on Broad Street, had been deeply disturbed when his daughter Hilda was named by Emily Gehring in her confession of June 2. His daughter, he said, had called Emily Gehring a liar but had refused to speak of the sisterhood; after the first confession she became moody and irritable, and he could hear her pacing about at night. After three nights of terrible insomnia Robert Meyer made a fateful decision: he determined to follow his daughter and disrupt her sexual experiments. At midnight on the fourth night he heard her footsteps creaking in the hall. He threw off his covers, slipped into sweatpants, sweatshirt, and running shoes, and followed her into the cool summer night. A block from the house she was met by two other girls, whom Meyer did not know. The three girls, wearing jeans, T-shirts, and nylon windbreakers tied around their waists, set off for the woods at the north end of town. Meyer, a deeply moral man, felt immense distaste and self-disgust as he pursued the three girls through the night, ducking behind trees like a spy in a late-night movie and creeping through back yards past swing sets, badminton nets, and fat plastic baseball

bats. It struck him that he was doing something at once unsavory and absurd. He did not know what he planned to do when he arrived at the woods, but of one thing he was certain: he would bring his daughter home. Once in the woods he was forced to advance with fanatical caution, since the snap of a single twig might give him away; he was reminded of boyhood walks on pine-needle trails, which became confused with childhood daydreams about Indians in hushed forests. The girls crossed a stream and emerged in a small moonlit clearing well protected by pines. Four other girls were already present in the clearing. Standing behind a thick oak at a distance of some twenty feet from the group, Meyer experienced, in addition to his self-revulsion, an intense fear of what he was about to witness. The seven girls did not speak, although they greeted one another with nods. Following what appeared to be a prearranged plan, the girls formed a small, close circle and raised their arms in such a way that all their forearms crossed. After this silent sign the girls separated and took up isolated positions, sitting against separate trees or lying with arms clasped behind the head. Not a single word was uttered. Nothing happened. After thirty-five minutes by his watch, Meyer turned and crept away.

#### RESPONSE TO MEYER'S TESTIMONY

Meyer's testimony, far from resolving the problem of the sisterhood, plunged us into deeper controversy. Enemies of the sisterhood heaped scorn on Meyer's report, although they disagreed about the nature of its untrustworthiness. Some insisted that Meyer

had invented the whole thing in a crude effort to protect his daughter; others argued that clever Hilda Meyer had plotted the entire episode, cunningly leading her father to the woods in order to have him witness a staged scene: *The Innocent Maidens in Repose*. Others pointed out that even if no deception had been practiced, by either Robert Meyer or his daughter, the testimony was in no sense decisive: Meyer by his own admission did not remain during the entire meeting, he observed the girls only a single time, and he observed only a single group of girls out of many groups. Was it not unlikely, people asked, was it not highly unlikely, that girls between the ages of twelve and fifteen would sneak out of their houses night after night, risking parental disapproval and even punishment, in order to meet with other girls in secluded and possibly dangerous places, solely for the purpose of doing nothing? This was not necessarily to say that the girls were engaging in forbidden deeds, although such deeds could never be ruled out, but merely to suggest that what they did do remained exasperatingly unknown. It was even possible that the girls, at the very time they were being observed by Meyer, had engaged in secret practices that he had failed to recognize; perhaps they had developed a system of signs and signals that Meyer had not been able to read.

#### THE TOWN

Night after night the members of the secret sisterhood set forth from their snug and restful rooms, the rooms of their childhood, to seek out dark and hidden places. Sometimes we see, or think we see, a group of them vanishing into the shadows of back yards lit

by kitchen windows, or gliding out of sight along a dark front lawn. Disdainful of our wishes, indifferent to our unhappiness, they seem a race apart, wild creatures of the night with streaming hair and eyes of fire, until we recall with a start that they are our daughters. What shall we do with our daughters? Uneasily we keep watch over them, fearful of provoking them to open defiance. Some say that we should lock our daughters in their rooms at night, that we should place bars on their windows, that we should punish them harshly, over and over again, until they bow their heads in obedience. One father is said to tie his thirteen-year-old daughter to her bed at night with clothesline rope and to reward her cries with blows from a leather belt. Most deplore such measures but remain uncertain what to do. Meanwhile our daughters are restless, night after night bands of girls are seen disappearing into dark places beyond the reach of streetlights. The sisterhood is growing. There are reports of girls moving across the parking lot behind the lumberyard, meeting in the small wood behind the high school tennis courts, climbing from the cellars of half-built houses, emerging from the boat shed by South Pond. Always they move at night, as if searching for something, something they cannot find in sunlight; and we who remain at home, awake in the dark, seem to hear, like the distant hum of trucks on the thruway, a continual faint sound of footfalls moving lightly across dark lawns and dim-lit roads, over pebbled driveways and curbside sand, through black leaves on forest paths, a ceaseless rustle of lines of footfalls weaving and unweaving in the night.

## EXPLANATIONS

Some say that the girls gather together in covens to practice the art of witchcraft under the guidance of older girls; there is talk of spells, potions, a goat-haired figure, wild seizures and abandons. Others say that the girls are a sisterhood of the moon: they dance to the ancient moon-goddess, dedicating themselves to her cold and passionate mysteries. Some say that the sisterhood, made restless by the boredom and emptiness of middle-class life, exists solely for the sake of erotic exploration. Others see in this explanation a desire to denigrate women and insist that the sisterhood is an intellectual and political association dedicated to the ideal of freedom. Still others reject these explanations and argue that the sisterhood betrays all the marks of a religious cult: the initiation, the vow, the secret meetings, the fanatical loyalty, the refusal to break silence. The many explanations, far from casting rays of sharp and separate light on the hidden places of the sisterhood, have gradually interpenetrated and thickened to form a cloudy darkness, within which the girls move unseen.

## THE UNKNOWN

Like other concerned citizens, I have brooded nightly over the sisterhood and the proliferating explanations, until the darkness outside my window becomes streaked with gray. I have asked myself why we seem unable to pierce their secret, why we can't catch them in the act. If I believe that I have at last discovered the true explanation, the one we should have seen from the beginning, it isn't

because I know something that others do not know. It's rather that my explanation honors the unknown and unseen, takes them into account as part of what is actually known. For it is precisely the element of the unknown, which looms so large in the case, that must be part of any solution. The girls, as we try to imagine them, keep vanishing into the unknown. They are penetrated by the unknown as by some black fluid. Is it possible that our search for the secret is misguided because we fail to include the unknown as a crucial element in that secret? Is it possible that our loathing of the unknown, our need to dispel it, to destroy it, to violate it through sharp, glittering acts of understanding, makes the unknown swell with dark power, as if it were some beast feeding on our swords? Are we perhaps searching for the wrong secret, the secret we ourselves long for? Or, to put it another way, is it possible that the secret lies open before us, that we already know what it is?

#### THE SECRET OF THE SISTERHOOD

I submit that we know everything that needs to be known in order to penetrate the mystery of the Sisterhood of Night. Dr. Robert Meyer, sole witness to a gathering, reported that nothing whatever took place during the thirty-five minutes he observed the girls. In her second confession Emily Gehring insisted that nothing happened, that nothing ever happened, there in the dark. I suggest that these are scrupulously accurate descriptions. I submit that the girls band together at night not for the sake of some banal and titillating rite, some easily exposed hidden act, but solely for the sake of withdrawal and silence. The members of the sisterhood wish to be

inaccessible. They wish to elude our gaze, to withdraw from investigation—they wish, above all, *not to be known*. In a world dense with understanding, oppressive with explanation and insight and love, the members of the silent sisterhood long to evade definition, to remain mysterious and ungraspable. Tell us! we cry, our voices shrill with love. Tell us everything! Then we will forgive you. But the girls do not wish to tell us anything, they don't wish to be heard at all. They wish, in effect, to become invisible. Precisely for this reason they cannot engage in any act that might reveal them. Hence their silence, their love of night solitude, their ritual celebration of the dark. They plunge into secrecy as into black smoke: in order to disappear.

#### IN THE NIGHT

I maintain that the Sisterhood of Night is an association of adolescent girls dedicated to the mysteries of solitude and silence. It is a high wall, a locked door, a face turning away. The sisterhood is a secret society that can never be disrupted, for even if we were to prevent the girls from meeting at night, even if we were to tie them to their beds for their entire lives, the dark purposes of the association would remain untouched. We cannot stop the sisterhood. Fearful of mystery, suspicious of silence, we accuse the members of dark crimes that secretly soothe us—for then, will we not know them? For we prefer witchcraft to silence, naked orgies to night stillness. But the girls long to be closed in silence, to become pale statues with blank eyes and breasts of stone. What shall we do with our daughters? Nightly the secret sisterhood moves through our

town. There is talk of the sisterhood spreading to younger girls, to older girls; even the wives of our town seem to us restless, evasive. We long to confront our silent daughters with arguments, with violence; we wake in the night from dreams of bleeding animals. Some say the sisterhood must be exposed and punished, for once such ideas take root, who will be able to stop them? Those of us who counsel patience are accused of cowardice. Already there is talk of bands of youths who roam the town at night armed with pointed sticks. What shall we do with our daughters? In the night we wake uneasily and tiptoe to their doors, pausing with our hands outstretched, unable to advance or retreat. We think of the long years of childhood, the party frocks and lollipops, the shimmer of trembling bubbles in blue summer air. We dream of better times.

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## THE WAY OUT

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Harter had expected the affair to end badly, but he hadn't expected it to end as badly as it did: he on the edge of the bed, grimly fastening the buttons of his shirt, she tearful and asprawl in her lavender nightie, the one that made him long for slimmer, younger, more desirable women, and then the surprise he ought to have foreseen, the little twist of fate that turned it all into farce—the suddenly opened door and the irate husband striding into the room. So that's that, Harter thought, he's going to kill me. But after a single step the husband stopped as if struck in the face, and Harter realized that only now had he raised his eyes to the unpleasant scene before him. Harter realized something else: he was going to get away with it. The man by the door was small and neat, almost delicate, no match for Harter. He wore a dark three-piece suit and a trim little