

## Equinox Society Radio 003

My Dear Strangers,

It's been said we're each the hero of our own story. People say that because it's easy to forget the actual point—that everyone else is the hero of *their* story. That my own hero status, for example, is entirely in my head. Yours is, too. Which means we often look at other people as secondary characters and do horrible, thoughtless shit that's good for us and lousy for them.

We see a sexy mouth we want to kiss, because that'd be perfect for the hero of our story, but the mouth belongs to the hero of *that* person's story, and maybe our own mouth is all wrong for that hero. They don't want to kiss us. That hurts our feelings. We say it isn't fair. We might even get angry, or petulant, or mean.

Because sometimes we're the antihero of our story. Sometimes, we're the monster.

**This is Equinox Society Radio, and I'm a stranger. Like you.**

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Tonight's first report is from society member Hank Ridley.

Hank's thirty, but he has the quiet confidence and balance you see in fifty-year-olds who know exactly who they are. He doesn't show off, he doesn't embellish, and he doesn't offer personal thoughts or feelings in his reports. In other words, he's rarely the hero of the stories he tells.

Hank makes a living as a freelance editor and proofreader—there's a good chance you've read a book he's anonymously worked on—but his true passion is occult reporting. He's an active participant on a private message board, called The Blackboard, where he posts and investigates leads.

Here's his latest report.

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A Kansas woman named Debra Willis surrendered to authorities and confessed to the murder and beheading of a local dental hygienist. At the time of her arrest, Debra's house was strewn with hundreds of teeth.

The dead hygienist, thirty-one-year-old Susanna Dobbs, had cleaned Debra Willis's teeth a week earlier. Susanna was new to the area, without local friends or family, and had reportedly moved

there to reinvent her life. She chose Kansas because she knew nothing about the state and viewed it as a place where she could live without preconceptions.

According to Debra Willis's account, she grew obsessed with Susanna's smile when she visited the dentist to have an abscess drained.

"I wanted her smile," she said. "My teeth're all fucked from Tina and I don't like smiling anymore." [Reporter's note: Tina is slang for methamphetamine.] "She kept smiling at me, saying nice things about my teeth," Debra said. "I wanted to be her friend but it was all bullshit. Everything she said was bullshit lies."

Debra stalked Susanna for a week by visiting locations she revealed in her Instagram stories. She eventually followed Susanna to a local sports bar, where she feigned surprise at the run-in and insisted on buying Susanna a drink. She had learned Susanna was seeking a new apartment and said she was renting a floor of her house, and she encouraged Susanna to follow her home to see it.

"She'd be my friend, right?" Debra said. "I've had a bad run, bad luck. I don't see people much. I needed somebody healthy around."

Debra's house had only a single spare room, and a single bathroom, rather than the full apartment that had been promised. When the two women made it to the house, Debra went in the bathroom and smoked meth. Susanna saw the true living situation and was about to leave when Debra emerged from the bathroom.

"She wasn't even gonna say bye," Debra said. "Just gone like I was nobody. So I made her look around more, see the kitchen and the TV room, and I grabbed her arm and she freaked. I don't remember, I don't know. She fought and I fought back, I wasn't thinking right, I choked her out or something. She was dead and there was nothing I could do about it."

Debra became enraged in her view that Susanna had forced her into the situation by rejecting her friendly overtures.

"I kept staring at her teeth," Debra said. "They were so perfect. So good and clean. I hated they belonged to someone else. I hated she never really smiled at me, just bullshit smiles. I wasn't going down for it, some bitch who thought she was better than me."

Debra believed if she destroyed Susanna's teeth and fingerprints, the rest of her body would be unidentifiable.

She cut off Susanna's head and hands with a square-blade shovel, buried the body near an abandoned silo fifteen miles away, and hid Susanna's car in a neglected cornfield. Then she returned home, where she tried to incinerate Susanna's head and hands in a burn barrel. Debra

stoked the fire for hours, using logs, charcoal briquettes, and gasoline, convinced she would be able to cremate the bones.

“Every time the fire burned low,” she said, “I saw her teeth in the bottom of the barrel.”

She eventually smashed Susanna’s skull with a dirt tamper.

Debra binged on meth for the next two days, and then she crashed and slept for the following twenty-four hours. Upon waking, she discovered all of her own teeth scattered around the bed. Her alarm turned to delight when she ran to her bathroom mirror and saw that she had grown a full, new set of perfect teeth.

“I thought the universe wanted me to have ‘em,” Debra said. “Like I deserved to have her teeth now that she was dead.”

Her delight was short-lived. Within minutes, Debra’s new teeth began to loosen and fall out of her mouth. She lost teeth at an average rate of six per hour—one every ten minutes. Whenever a tooth fell out, it was replaced by a fresh tooth that aggressively formed and emerged. The satisfying itch and ache of loose teeth, so familiar from childhood, quickly gave way to inflamed gums and throbbing pain.

Debra was unable to eat solid foods without losing several teeth in quick succession, which only exacerbated the turnover. Her mouth was continuously bloody. The taste of blood made her nauseous, and when she forced herself to consume liquids for hydration and nourishment, she often swallowed a tooth accidentally.

Debra rinsed with salt water and mouthwash to no avail. She purchased a tube of denture adhesive and attempted to glue her loose teeth into place, but the constant growth of new teeth proved unstoppable. The adhesive heightened her pain by increasing the pressure, until whatever teeth she’d bonded with the glue were forced out together.

Debra binged on meth for three more days, hoping to dull the torment. When she finally crashed, she was malnourished and underslept. She had, by then, lost an estimated three- to four-hundred teeth since murdering Susanna Dobbs. Her teeth continued to grow, fall out, and grow again. The pain in her mouth was unbearable, and her psychological and emotional distress was so profound, she called 911 and confessed to the crime, convinced it was the only way to end her suffering.

When police arrived at her house, the rate of her tooth-loss dramatically increased.

“The door was open when we got there,” Officer Janklow said. “We went inside and Ms. Willis was kneeling on her living room floor, surrounded by teeth. She looked up and said, ‘Help me,’ and three or four bloody teeth fell out of her mouth. She had cups full of them all around the

house. There were teeth in the trash, the sink, the toilet. I didn't know what to make of it. The paramedics didn't, either."

Debra was arrested and taken to the local hospital. Physicians were unable to alleviate or diagnose her affliction. She was interrogated and, against the advice of her public attorney, provided a detailed, signed confession of her murder of Susanna Dobbs. She was held in custody at the hospital and sedated for the night.

Despite being under close medical and police supervision as she slept, Debra Willis choked to death, on teeth, shortly after 2 A.M. An autopsy revealed no satisfactory explanation.

Susanna Dobbs's remains have been recovered and properly buried. Her mother, in New Hampshire, has petitioned for the reclamation of the hundreds of teeth Debra grew and lost, as she believes they were Susanna's teeth and ought to be buried with the rest of her daughter's remains.

Hank Ridley  
Equinox Society Reporter

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I remember losing my baby teeth, one at time, all those years ago. The memory's so strong, I can feel it in my mouth right now. Forcing the tip of my tongue under the sharp edge of a wiggly tooth. The taste of blood. The sting of moving a tooth back and forth against the gums until it was loose enough to rip free. It didn't feel like an ailment. It was natural and exciting—losing a piece of myself so a new piece could grow.

Debra Willis experienced something else entirely. We've all heard this kind of story before. It's gratifying when the world provides some measure of justice after an awful crime. Still it's hard to feel relieved, even if you're someone who relishes revenge, because Susanna Dobbs is still dead. Thirty-one years old, starting her life fresh in Kansas. Sometimes the hero of her own story gets attacked and decapitated by a meth addict, for no clear reason, and nothing will ever make it right.

Debra Willis seemed unremorseful anyway. She sounded sorry not because she did something terrible, but because she was suffering for it. An extreme case of somebody saying, "I'm sorry you're mad at me," instead of "I'm sorry I hurt you."

But let's say at the end, gagging on all those teeth, Debra felt legitimate remorse—that she finally saw Susanna as a full human being, and not just a secondary character in her life. Let's say she truly regretted the murder. What do you do when you can't make amends? When whatever you did wrong is unfixable?

That's the core of a lot of paranormal stories, especially ghost stories—the person who lingers, after death, after messing up in life.

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Society member William Rook is devoted to occult exploration. He lives in a haunted brownstone in Troy, NY. His mother lost her mind there, when William was a child, and he eventually bought the house and moved there to look for answers. He found answers, in a way, and learned a lot more he didn't anticipate.

The story of his first season in the house is coming later this year as an audiobook. It's a story of loneliness, and love, and the kind of contact that saves people's lives. We'll let you know when it's published.

In the meantime, William's life has carried on, strange as ever, in the unique and otherworldly house he calls home. I've been there myself. It's an unusual house, even by unusual-house standards.

He sent me the following email.

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Dear Dennis,

What a day. My downstairs toilet finally wore out, and when I removed it for replacement, the old flange was so corroded, I spent an hour removing it and trying to level the new flange with the bathroom's uneven floor.

I also discovered a disembodied man hovering in the second-floor hallway.

The hallway's narrow and long, with a grimy plaster ceiling and a hardwood floor with a long, lichenous carpet runner. Two wall sconces provide a moderate light at each end. The disembodied man was floating in the gap between the sconces and was somewhat difficult to see. It's possible he'd been there for days and I simply hadn't noticed.

I was only mostly certain the figure was a man. He floated face-up against the ceiling. He was motionless, with his arms rigid at his sides, and was as horizontally straight as someone lying on a floor. From below, I could see the back of his head, which was bald, but none of his distinguishing features. He was nude, as many ghosts are—an essential, lingering self without ornament or clothes.

He wasn't translucent, but his form was an odd pinkish gray, like neon light submerged in winter slush.

I determined he wasn't a solid body by pushing a Swiffer handle through his torso, and then by climbing onto a step-ladder and reaching my hand through his back. My palm met no resistance until it touched the ceiling. He felt neither warm nor cold. I perceived no electric charge.

He didn't make sound. I couldn't directly see his face, but his jaw was moving and I was pretty sure he was silently mouthing words. Since I couldn't turn his ethereal body for a better view, I ran to the Oddments Room, found a hand mirror, returned to the hallway, and slid the mirror between his face and the ceiling.

His face was too close to the ceiling for me to see anything except his eyes. His eyes were open. I may have imagined it, but I think his pupils focused when the mirror moved in front of his face, and he suddenly found himself staring at his own reflection for the first time since his death.

His jaw kept moving, but his ethereal mouth was pressed an inch or two into the ceiling, completely hidden from view.

My solution was to open a viewing portal so I could look *down* at him from the third-floor hallway. I used my Sawzall to cut a hole in the ceiling around his head. The work was messier and more challenging than expected, but once I had the first hole finished, I reached through the man's head, into the ceiling gap, and drilled a starter hole through the floor of the hallway above.

I walked upstairs covered in plaster dust, found the starter hole, and had a much easier time cutting into the floor.

I should say it was physically easier. It was much harder, psychologically, to use a Sawzall in close proximity to what appeared to be a live human face. I was relieved to see that, throughout the process, the man didn't flinch or suffer any obvious anxiety. Chunks of flooring and sawdust drifted through his head to the hallway below, and I was left with a crude but adequate viewing hole.

My man's head was visible eighteen inches below the surface of the hole—the gap being the joisted space between the house's two levels. The gap was dark. A flashlight would have been useless because he didn't have a solid face; the beam of light would have simply passed through his head. Fortunately, the man was faintly self-illuminating, and his pink-gray face glowed up at me with excellent clarity.

His open eyes didn't blink. He was bald, as I mentioned earlier, and now I could see he had thick eyebrows and a strong, black mustache—like a pair of nose glasses without the glasses. He

appeared to be middle-aged, no older than fifty. His expression was blank, like that of someone in a trance.

I'd been right—he was silently mouthing words, and because he didn't move his eyes or turn his face even a little, his mysterious speech seemed directed at me with unsettling intensity.

I concentrated and tried to lip-read his words, and after a minute or two, I recognized the pattern of his mouth's movements and determined he was repeating a single sentence.

"I never explained what happened that night."

I sat away from the hole, with my back against the wall, and pondered his words. To whom was he attempting to speak? What had happened on the night in question? The answers were impossible to guess, but I imagined he was speaking to his lover, or his child, about an incident in darkness—something so important in the story of their lives, he'd persisted after death in order to express it.

As I daydreamed various scenarios—a fatal accident, a betrayal, maybe a missed opportunity of necessary love—I began to absentmindedly stare up. My eyes zeroed in on a strange protrusion in the ceiling.

I stood for a closer look and discovered it was a nose and upper lip. They were the same pinkish gray as the man's spectral form below, and I realized it was the nose and lip of a *second* hovering body, nearly all of which was hidden in the space between the ceiling and the crawl-space attic above. It was straight above the hole I'd cut in the floor. If I liberated the new face, too, they'd be able to see each other directly.

I sawzalled a new hole in the ceiling, cutting a wide oval and revealing the second face. It was a woman this time. Once the plaster dust settled and my eyes felt clear, I stood beneath her with my feet on either side of the floor hole and looked up to examine her features.

She had long dark hair that didn't dangle around her cheeks—her hair, like the rest of her, was unaffected by gravity. She was also middle-aged, and her eyebrows and nose resembled those of the man enough to make me think they were possibly brother and sister.

Her expression was neutral. She stared without blinking and didn't seem to notice me, as if she were waiting for something else and wouldn't react until she saw it. I realized I was blocking her view of the man below, so I stepped to the side and let the two faces see each other at last.

I watched and waited, standing as close to the floor and ceiling holes as possible without getting in the way. Since the man's head was recessed a foot-and-a-half beneath me in the floor, only part of his face was visible from where I stood, but I saw that he immediately stopped mouthing his silent words, and that his expression grew pregnant with emotion. Was it amazement, fear, or hope? His opportunity had come to tell the woman something crucial—a

secret he had kept and needed to convey.

The woman's face stayed neutral as she stared at the man below. Eventually he seemed to mouth new words. I couldn't interpret his speech from my vantage point, but he appeared to talk with urgency and passion. I was glad I'd brought the two of them together, and I looked up at the woman, anticipating an expression of peace or marvelous relief from whatever the man was telling her.

Instead her eyes widened and seemed to dangerously vibrate. Her nose crinkled at the bridge, and her entire face lengthened as her mouth stretched open. I've never seen a more harrowing scream. She made no sound, but she bared her upper and lower teeth, all the way to her canines and gums. Her open mouth was cavernous and grim, and her scream had the indrawn intensity of suction.

I forced myself to look at the man's face below. He'd stopped mouthing words. His expression was one of startled fear, and possibly confusion. Whatever he'd explained had only triggered rage, and after waiting for his chance, even after death, his words couldn't fix whatever was between them.

I looked back up at the woman and she vanished in a scarlet flare. The light warmed my face and left behind a stink of burned insulation. It was amazing to see, like a flash of power she'd saved and finally unleashed. I felt weak in the legs and knelt, and then my body lapsed forward and I looked into the hole again.

The man's stricken face stared a while longer. I was about to ask him for an explanation of what had happened when he paled and disappeared, leaving nothing but the hole.

Correction: Three holes. One in the hallway ceiling below, one in the floor, and one in the ceiling above. I've decided to leave the ceiling holes open for the time being, in case either the man or woman reappears. I'd hate to patch and re-plaster only to find a nose poking out again as soon as I finished. I've covered the floor hole with plywood, so I don't break an ankle, forgetting it's there.

I did finish the toilet replacement. Never a pleasant job, but few home improvement projects are more satisfying once they're done. I hope your own plumbing issues are going well, Dennis.

I'll let you know if either hovering body returns.

Yours,  
William

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Home ownership is full of surprises. Last Friday night, I went down to my basement to get a ladder and found that our main outflow pipe was clogged, and that water had been backing up onto the basement floor for days. An emergency plumber came at 10 P.M., ran a fifty-foot drain snake, and pulled out a mass of tree roots that had grown into the pipe and caused the blockage.

I asked him, “What’s the weirdest thing you’ve ever snaked out of a pipe?”

He said, “A finger.”

A man’s wife had cut the guy’s ring finger off, put it in a Ziploc bag, and flushed it. I don’t know why she bothered with the Ziploc, or why she cut the finger off in the first place, but even with the finger recovered, even if the emotions of that night had eventually cooled and settled, it’s hard to imagine a marriage coming back from that.

Remorse, punishment, and atonement aren’t always enough. Maybe we can’t always make amends in the afterlife, either.

There are things I’ve done and can’t take back. I’ve tried to be good to people I know, but sometimes I’ve failed. I haven’t assaulted or decapitated anyone, but I’ve been selfish. I’ve been smallminded and mean. I can close my eyes right now and see the faces of people I’ve hurt.

To anyone listening who’s been on the receiving end of my failures, I’m sorry. I was stupid. I was weak. Message me somehow, if you want, and I’ll try to make things right. Or if talking to me again wouldn’t be good for you—if I’m a lingering pain or a bad memory—please know I’m sorry. I wish I’d done better. You deserved better than the hero of my own broken story.

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*Equinox Society Radio is produced by Dennis Mahoney. New episodes appear sporadically.*

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*Our three-note theme is played by Jack Mahoney.*

*Imagine our closing song is “Over” by Alice Boman.*

Until next time, dear strangers... take care and look beyond.