

## The Pallbearers Club

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By Paul Tremblay

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### About the Author

Paul Tremblay has won the Bram Stoker, British Fantasy, and Massachusetts Book Awards and is also the author of *Survivor Song*, *Growing Things and Other Stories*, *The Cabin at the End of the World*, *Disappearance at Devil's Rock*, *A Head Full of Ghosts*, and the crime novels *The Little Sleep* and *No Sleep Till Wonderland*. He lives outside Boston with his family.

## *The Pallbearers Club*

### Liner Notes

Much of this fictional found memoir is autobiography, or autobiography fashioned into fiction. I mean, except for the casual vampirism and the joining of many bands and the erasure of my siblings, who I didn't include because there would've been

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too many characters to juggle (sorry, Erin and Dan). Anyway, I don't intend to bore you with "hey, this happened to me" commentary but instead maybe offer some insight on some of the how it was written and maybe the why and anything that might seem fun or worth mentioning. There will be long tracks and short punchy ones too.

## SIDE A

**Track:** *"I am not Art Barbara."*

In August 2019, I was one of the guests of honor at Necronomicon in Providence, Rhode Island. Necronomicon is a convention that celebrates the wide world of weird fiction, and the con takes over downtown Providence every two years. It was a bittersweet weekend, because mere days before the convention began, I'd dropped off my son, Cole, at college in Los Angeles for his freshman year. I was excited for him but depressed for me. Much of that weekend went by in a fog. However, an unexpected moment of joy was provided by the wallpaper of my room in the Graduate hotel. The wallpaper's design was a hand-drawn library, with spines of books filling fake shelves. Many of the books were real, but there were fake books, including one that said something about "Art Barbara" on its spine. Who was Art Barbara, and why did I have so much fun saying the name? I took Art home with me once the weekend was over.

**Track:** *"I'm a senior, and I'm starting a new club. It's called the Pallbearers Club."*

November 2019: My novel *Survivor Song* was fully completed, copyedits turned in, which meant that I was essentially a writer no longer on a book deal. *Survivor Song* finished off the contract that started with *The Cabin at the End of the World* and had *Growing Things and Other Stories* sandwiched between. So that meant, um, I wanted/needed to get back on a book deal if I could. It wasn't quite starting over from scratch, as I have an amazing editor who wanted to continue working with me for some reason, but it was a mini start-over. I wasn't in a rush, though. I had time. (What an insidious, little sentence that is, with, unknown to the then-me, the pandemic looming on the horizon.)

Monday mornings at my school began with a school-wide assembly at which two to three seniors gave speeches, then there were more speeches from various

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people – way too many speeches for a Monday morning, at least for my bleary-eyed attention span. Anyway, on this Monday morning a senior went up to announce he was starting a new club. He said, “I’m starting a Pallbearers Club,” and described what the club would do. It was a kind and worthy community service endeavor. Also, to this horror writer’s ears, an amazing setup to a story that I desperately wanted to write.

I had the club and a novel title. Who would be in such a club and why? I put myself in the shoes of the senior starting the club and couldn’t help but think about how awkward I was in high school, how I would never have stood in front of the school to make an announcement, never mind start a club. Maybe I’m cruel to the teen-me now (which becomes more apparent in the novel), but I was going to put poor old teen-me to work in my fiction and have him do things that would’ve made him curl up into a ball and die from embarrassment. Or relive many of the things that made him curl up and almost die from embarrassment.

**Track:** *“Did you wear it to your first communion?”*

A brief foray into more autobiography, sorry. Mr. Stephens the funeral director was a fictional combination of two men. The first was Dr. Sampson, a dean of the Multicultural Student Affairs Office at Providence College. As a part of my financial aid package as a student, I was allowed to work on campus, and I worked for Dr. Sampson my first two years at school. He had a big, infectious personality, was unfailingly kind, and never turned a student away who wanted to talk or meet with him. He often drew me into conversations about my future even though I had no idea what that would look like or wanted it to look like. It was clear he cared, and I always felt lighter after being around him.

The second man, and the one who I semi-quoted with the line above, was Peter Straub. Peter was a seminal, formative author for me. His work always challenged me, and I would at times not be up to the challenge until I went back for a second or third read. Peter was a fixture at many of the conventions I attended between 2004 and 2016. Like Dr. Sampson, Peter was approachable and always had time for us, his student writers, and I had the incredible fortune to get to know Peter a little. He remains the only author I know who, upon seeing him, I always had to overcome an initial moment of inner fan boy screaming in my head, “That’s fucking Peter Straub!” At a Shirley Jackson Awards ceremony, I wore a suit I’d just purchased for my sister’s wedding in

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2010. It was the first suit I'd ever bought (aside: I once had a goal of not ever buying a suit, yet another goal I didn't achieve). Anyway, since I had the thing, I thought I'd wear it to the Jacksons and class up the joint (one goal achieved: I've always wanted to use the phrase "class up the joint"). I walked by Peter and said hello. He was his usual impeccably dressed self, and with the warmth of his bear-hug baritone he joked about my suit (see quote above). One more Peter story, and it relates to the writing of this book in terms of how I feel about it now. At an earlier Readercon, he gave an intimate talk about the struggles he had publishing (not writing) the novel that should've been *The Skylark* but was instead published as *A Dark Matter*. His talk was an erudite mix of sobering publishing industry farce, barroom raconteurism, and humble, humane confessional. At the very end he said to the gathered, and gruffly, "Eh. I feel like I just took a shower in front of you people."

**Track:** "He told us to call him 'Father W.'"

I like to imagine this is the same Father Wanderly (though twenty-five years younger) who performed the possession in my novel *A Head Full of Ghosts*.

**Track:** "I liked Albert Finney in **Wolfen**."

This is as good a place as any to briefly talk about our other narrator, Mercy. If Art is 80-ish percent me (give or take an ish), Mercy is 10 percent me and 10 percent her own thing. Don't argue percentages with a math teacher. Aside from the real Mercy Brown's backstory, which we'll get to later, Mercy came from my following the logic of the found memoir conceit: Who found it? What would they do with it? I knew right away that Mercy would be compelled to comment not only at the end of chapters but within the manuscript itself. One of my favorite kind of novels is the first-person "asshole" novel. The narrator is less an antihero than someone who severely tests your empathy by their endearing and frustrating incompetence at, well, living. Think John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces*, or Sam Lipsyte's *Home Land*, or Sara Levine's *Treasure Island!!!* (a favorite book that I reread before writing *TPC*). My plan was to have *two* asshole narrators in Art and Mercy. Twice the assholery, twice the fun? Not sure anyone else, my editor included, feels the same way.

**Track:** *"If I were to title this part of my commentary like your chapters, I'd call it 'Dead Set on Destruction.'"*

Here Mercy points out that each chapter title is a Hüsker Dü song title. If you've never listened to them before, I won't judge you (much) and instead will amicably point you toward their robust catalog of music. If you are unfamiliar with punk/indie/'90s alternative music, I suggest you start with *Flip Your Wig*.

**Track:** *"Interview with Mercy Brown, a New England Vampire"*

There's plenty of information online about Mercy, and as I mentioned in the acknowledgments, Michael E. Bell's book *Food for the Dead* is an incredibly thorough resource. The part that I can't get over is that I've lived in New England all my life and didn't know about her (or I didn't remember her story; it's possible I'd heard it before, but it didn't register or sink in) until I started writing this novel. Awareness of her story does seem to be on the rise. To wit, in the fall of 2021, one of my favorite bands, Clutch, released their record *Sunrise on Slaughter Beach*, and it features a haunting song called, simply, "Mercy Brown."

**Track:** *"I had a deadly outside shot thanks to countless hours shooting by myself."*

While not egoless, I would generally describe myself as anxiously humble, except when it comes to basketball. I did not play for my high school team because of my physical limitations (as described within the ~~memoir~~ novel), but I did, as it reads above, spend most of my afternoons in the backyard, shooting and keeping track of the number of shots made in a row, my percentage made, etc. In my twenties I made twenty-seven three-pointers in a row. I was/am automatic if left open and I have a quick release. Post-back surgery, at six-foot-four and eventually two hundred pounds, I could shoot over people, and I played a lot of basketball in my adult years. I also coached my high school's JV basketball team. Back and knee (I refuse to say age) issues have conspired to just about end my full court playing days, but I can still shoot better than you.

**Track:** *“Le Mangeur Difficile”*

Whoever the world’s pickiest eater was as a child, I would’ve given them a run. My palate has grown considerably as an adult, however, and I like many, if not most, food things, certainly more than Stephen Graham Jones and Chris Golden do.

I still hate/fear/loathe pickles and I don’t like coffee, and my guiding rule (with notable exceptions) when it comes to cuisine: food is hot, drinks are cold. I broke the cold drinks rule in the mid-2010s, when I decided to become even *more* adult, and I tried and liked hot black tea. Now I drink too much of it.

**Track:** *“YOU were the gaunt, pale, long-fingered, Count Orlock from Murnau’s silent Nosferatu in that moment and maybe in the rest of the moments to come after.”*

I’m a terrible judge of my own work in terms of what might be scary to readers. What scares someone is so subjective, I honestly don’t try to write scares and I certainly don’t define horror by scares or lack of them (“it wasn’t scary so it’s not horror” is the most insipid, childish, eye-roll-inducing statement, and I instantly discount/ignore the statement utterer’s opinions on story and possibly fashion, music, food, and weather). With this preamble in mind, I don’t think *The Pallbearers Club* is one of my scarier or viscerally disturbing works. I do hope that its affect is one of lingering dread, particularly once you get through the whole thing.

Anyway! Vampires have always scared the hell out of me, with Count Orlock and Christopher Lee being two vampires who have appeared the most in my nightmares. Well, I’m not saying Christopher Lee himself was a vampire, but I’m also not saying he wasn’t.

**Track:** *“I will not dwell on the rest of my stay in the hospital.”*

The back surgery and health stuff mentioned throughout the book were all things I dealt with and continue to deal with. The spinal fusion was so long ago it feels like it happened to another person. A person whom I named Art.



## SIDE B

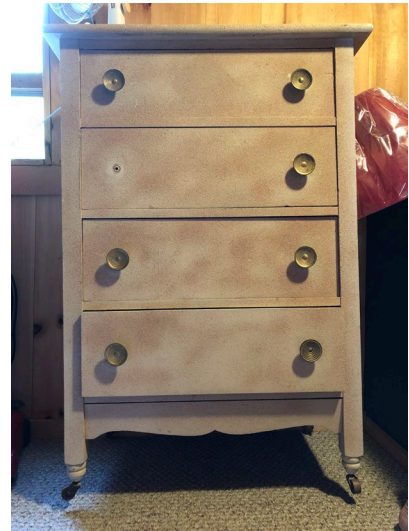
**Track:** *"You can't give yourself a nickname, dude."*

Mercy has a valid point. I mostly never gave myself a nickname, except once in grad school. I went to the University of Vermont and earned a master's degree in mathematics by the skin of my teeth. The math department was in a creaky old house just off the main campus. The grad students claimed the basement, which is where, like vampires, grad students should always be kept. We had a Ping-Pong table, and much to my surprise and delight there was a long and honorable tradition of math grad students and professors playing Ping-Pong well and competitively. I was all in, and I got really good at Ping-Pong (so I might be obnoxious about Ping-Pong as well as basketball, and John Langan is still upset with me for spiking him mercilessly at a convention called NECON). The underground math folk created a ladder with names on tongue-depressors sticks, which would move up or down depending upon who won a match. I gave myself the Ping-Pong name of Nuke, named after *Bull Durham's* Nuke LaLoosh. Nuke struck fear in the hearts of grad students everywhere. Well, if math grad students had hearts.

**Track:** *"The second drawer is missing a knob?"*

The summer of 2019, we Tremblays rented a small cottage/cabin (no, I don't learn lessons from any of my previous books) on a large pond in Maine. The spot on the pond was gorgeous, but the cabin was a little rough. The porous window screens had long given up the battle against stopping bugs from getting inside the place. At night, the mosquitos got so bad the kids wore mesh netting over their heads while inside the cabin. On our first night there, around midnight, the kids called for me from their bedroom: "Dad, come look at this." No, I didn't want to look at whatever was happening in their room at midnight, but duty bound, I slouched into their room.

They told me to look at the dresser. I remained in the doorway, already afraid to look.



Why am I looking at a dresser? I looked and stared until I saw it. Its legs weren't touching the floor. It appeared to be floating. Hushed tones, nervous jokes, too dark to fully inspect. I wished the kids sweet dreams and slept in the neighboring room with the covers pulled mostly over my head.

I did take a picture, though, and knew that I had to use the ~~bolted into the wall~~ floating dresser in a story someday.

The sketch of the evil floating dresser included later in this book was drawn by my daughter, Emma. Fulfilling a pandemic promise of taking Emma to get a tattoo when she was old enough, she and I got tattoos in the summer of 2022. My tattoo is her drawing of the floating dresser.

**Track:** *"I do hope you'll detail the folly and pathos of your punk Quixotic quest with your many ridiculous and pretentious band names."*

Almost all Art's bands are fictional, or if there were/are bands by those names, the reference to those bands was not purposeful.

Back to UVM and Burlington, Vermont. Fellow grad student Scott "Scooter" Stevens played in an early '90s band named Chin Ho, but I borrowed his prior band, the Macedonians, for Art. Also, the band Chin Music is a tip of the cap (not to worry, Andy, I'm not wearing a hat indoors) to a song by Future of the Left – an excellent band with lyrics I've quoted in the epigraphs of *A Head Full of Ghosts* and *The Cabin at the End of the World*.

**Track:** *"I have no punching bag at the back of my throat."*

I would not recommend having your uvula removed a month before getting married.

I would recommend entering the uvula into a fundraising raffle at your school. It's great fun.



Fine, I didn't raffle off my real uvula. The hospital wouldn't let me keep it. I did place a rolled-up piece of gum into a small vial of olive oil, so it looked like my uvula. Some lucky eighth grader won it.

**Track:** *"The only piece of paper I had on me was my Social Security card."*

I did in fact have my Social Security card signed by Bob Mould in the manner described. What a good sport he is.

**Track:** *"My first step didn't land."*

I'm often asked if I ever write about or use my dreams in fiction. Almost never. My dreams are generally too disjointed or too upsetting to want to pick apart. However! I did have a nightmare in which I ended up attempting to run away from something while in the basement of my house. As I ran, I felt a presence, and then I lifted into the air. I woke up screaming, moaning. Moan-screaming. That feeling of being taken over, of being moved against my will and how wrong it felt, would take another ninety-six thousand words to describe/explain why it was so terrifying.

**Track:** *"Is there a monster at the end of this chapter?"*

This line is a reference to Grover's (or Jon Stone's) sublime, postmodern horror masterwork, *The Monster at the End of this Book*. Who's the monster by the end of the book? I think you know we all are. I don't teach writing very often, but in the summer of 2021, I taught a weeklong workshop for the Southampton Writers Conference, and I subjected the poor students to my reading and deconstructing of Grover's book.

**Track:** *"Coal Song"*

After college and while at graduate school, I fell in love with reading for pleasure, and I was teaching myself how to play guitar (mainly looking up guitar tablature online of Hüsker Dü and Sugar songs). I wanted to be a punk/indie guitar hero. In the fall of 1995, only a few months after graduating from UVM, I got a job teaching high school mathematics. I also somewhat inexplicably started messing around with writing short stories. For the remainder of the '90s, I split my free/hobby time

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between writing stories and recording songs on an old four-track tape recorder. Sadly, I found out I was a better writer than a musician, and in the early 2000s, I threw my energies into becoming a better writer. I still played guitar for fun, though, and when my son, Cole, was two, I wrote “Cole Song.” The lyrics were all bits of things he’d said, and I’d play it and he’d dance around the room. Though he got sick of me playing it and the dancing part ended, and he’d be the two-year-old teen version of “Dad, just stop.”

Cole is himself a musician now (performing and releasing songs under the name Bond. – the period or dot at the end is important if you search him out) and studying music production. With the release of this novel, he and I recorded “Coal Song,” along with three others that we released on Bandcamp under the band name the Pallbearers Club. My daughter, Emma, sings on one of the songs too. We’re like a horror Partridge Family. It was a joy to do, and I thank Cole and Emma for sharing their considerable talents.

**Track:** *“What if the part you so achingly want to fix, change, banish, or destroy is the part that is fundamentally you?”*

A difficult question we all ask ourselves. Part of what this novel means or represents for me is the sometimes healthy, sometimes not-so-healthy relationship between my writing and my anxiety/depression.

I think the above is one of the three most important lines in the novel. The first is in the opening chapter. Mercy writes, “It occurs to me if our memories of certain events differ, that doesn’t necessarily mean one or both of us are lying, certainly not lying on purpose.”

**Track:** *“It’s the headstone photo I included in the manuscript.”*

Once I told my cousin Michael Columbe about the book and Mercy Brown, he insisted we go to Mercy’s gravesite. Always take a cemetery buddy when visiting a purported vampire’s grave. Any excuse to go to Rhode Island and hang out with Michael is a good excuse. It was a cold, dreary New England November day, the kind of pre-winter day I like occasionally, but November tends to be a monthlong slog of

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them. Mercy's gravesite isn't very far from the main road and is easy to find. If you go, be respectful, and tell her I said thanks and hi.

**Track:** *"I search for the name Kathleen Blanchet. I search for names using the initials KB. I search for names using the initials MB."*

Kathleen Blanchet's name shares the same initials as Karen Brissette, who is the blogger from *A Head Full of Ghosts*, and as the unnamed freaky dog walker in my story "Notes from the Dog Walkers." In a fun accident or quirk, Mercy and Mary Brown's initials are the same as Merry and Marjorie Barrett's in *AHFoG*.

Mercy also mentions watching and obsessing over the reality show *The Possession*, in the most direct reference to my other novel.

So yeah, *A Head Full of Ghosts* references, I can't help myself.

**Track:** *"The mouth of Eddie Patrick's driveway [Comment: An inversion of what is to be? Who is still consuming whom?]."*

Ah, Eddie Patrick and all the Eddie Patricks of the world. There are too many of them, aren't there? This one is modeled after a high school bully of mine (there's got to be a better way to write that; he's not mine, I take no ownership of that tool bag), and his name is a cobbling together of, um, other people. So yeah, I'm not above taking fictional revenge on people who've wronged me, even if that wronging is a dumbass book review(s), which I'm much better at not reading now. Mostly.

Near the time I started writing this novel, I thought I'd made the self-discovery that I wrote because I was continually trying to prove to the teen Paul/Art inside me that I have worth, that I have something worth saying. I thought maybe writing out some of those old anxieties and feelings might be cathartic in some way. I honestly had a blast writing much of this novel, but it wasn't cathartic in the least. My self-esteem is still far too reliant upon what others think/say about me, and in an age when writers have never been subjected to more feedback . . . let's just say it's a challenge.

Mercy's question is a good one — one for which I need to find a better answer.

**Track:** *"I will be the monster you wanted and needed me to be."*

After brainstorming and writing notes about what this book might become, I scratched out a rough ten-page summary. Part of that was by professional necessity: my editor needed thirty to fifty pages of a manuscript and a summary to make an offer on the book, which, happily, she did.

My summaries tend to be much more detailed at the start, and then things tend to get handwavy. I had only a foggy notion of what the end might be. Here is the end of the summary I sent to my editor:

*The novel works toward a climax with Art's version of the horrific events of what happens inside of Eddie Patrick's home.*

*The novel ends with Mercy's versions of the events and a heartbreaking eulogy for her troubled friend, Art Barbara.*

Quite the elevator pitch, eh?

I didn't know my full ending yet. But I did know what the last line would be, and the challenge was to find my way there and earn it.

That line is the third of three thesis statements of this book. I probably shouldn't say too much because I'll spoil it if it works for you (too late).

You can (and I do) read it as Mercy being joyfully, diabolically, triumphantly creepy.

But also, I think and hope there's some forgiveness in that line too.