

WHAT DID THE C.I.A. DO TO HIS FATHER?

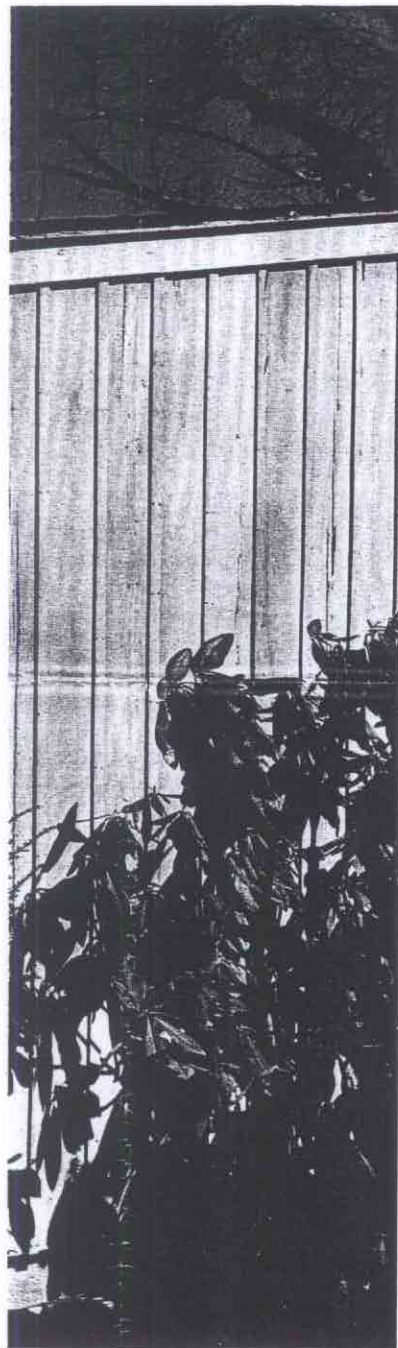
ERIC OLSON'S LIFELONG MISSION IS TO PROVE THAT HIS FATHER'S DEATH WASN'T A SUICIDE. BY MICHAEL IGNATIEFF

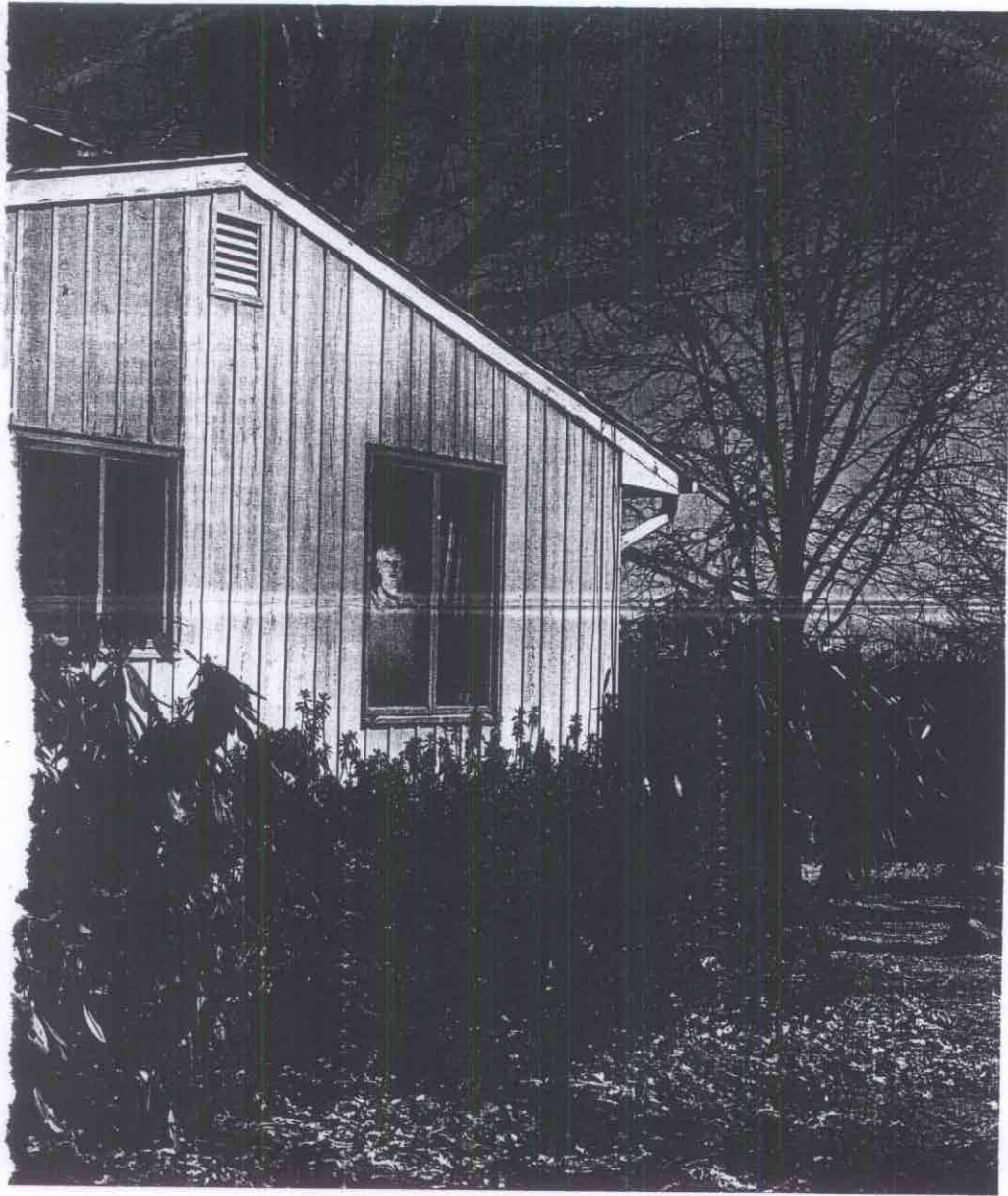
PHOTOGRAPH BY TARYN SIMON

For a quarter of a century, a close friend of mine, a Harvard classmate, has believed that the Central Intelligence Agency murdered his father, a United States government scientist. Believing this means, in my friend's words, "leaving the known universe," the one in which it is innocently accepted that an agency of the American government would never do such a thing. My friend has left this known universe, even raising his father's body from the grave where it had lain for 40 years to test the story the C.I.A. told him about his death. The evidence on the body says that the agency may have lied. But knowing this has not healed my friend. When I ask him what he has learned from his ordeal, he says, "Never dig up your father." Then he laughs, and the look on his face is wild, bitter and full of pain.

On Nov. 28, 1953, around 2 a.m., Armand Pastore, night manager at the Statler Hotel opposite Penn Station in New York, rushed out the front door on Seventh Avenue to find a middle-aged man lying on the sidewalk in his undershirt and shorts. "He was broken up something awful," Pastore told reporters many years later, flat on his back with his legs smashed and bent at a terrible angle. Looking up, Pastore could see a blind pushed through an empty window frame high up in the Statler. The man had fallen from the 10th floor — apparently after crashing through a closed window — but he was alive. "He was trying to mumble something, but I couldn't make it out. It was all garbled, and I was trying to get his name." By the time

Eric Olson still lives in the family's ranch house.





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the priest and the ambulance came, the stranger on the sidewalk was dead.

When Pastore went up to the stranger's room — 1018A — with the police, they found a man who gave his name as Robert Lashbrook sitting on the toilet with his head in his hands. Down at reception, Pastore asked the hotel telephone operator whether she had overheard any calls from 1018A. Two, she said. In one, a voice had said, "He's gone." The voice on the other end replied, "That's too bad." Lashbrook admitted making two calls but has denied saying anything of the sort.

The high trees over the family house in Frederick, Md., were still in darkness when Eric Olson was woken by his mother, Alice, and taken into the living room. Upstairs, his younger sister, Lisa, and brother, Nils, slept undisturbed. Lt. Col. Vincent Ruwet, his father's boss at the Army research establishment at Fort Detrick, told Eric something bad had happened. "Fallen or jumped" and "accident" were the words he heard as he looked across the room at his mother, frozen and empty-eyed, on the sofa opposite. "In that moment when I learned that my father had gone out a window and died," Eric later wrote, "it was as if the plug were pulled from some central basin of my mind and a vital portion of my consciousness drained out." He was 9 years old.

WHEN I FIRST MET ERIC OLSON IN 1974, BOTH OF US WERE WORKING on doctorates at Harvard. Mine was in history, his in clinical psychology. What I liked about him was his maniacal cackle. One minute he would be laboring some abstruse point in his Southern drawl, the next his face would be alight with a snaggle-toothed grin, and his body would be electrified by the joke he had just slipped by me, deadpan. The laugh was an attractive and alarming trait, because sometimes he would laugh about things that weren't funny at all.

His Harvard research was about how to help people recover from trauma. With the psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton, he had been to Man, W.Va., to interview survivors of a disaster in which 125 people had been killed and 4,000 people made homeless when a dam burst and a wall of black water containing coal waste swept down Buffalo Creek. He and Lifton wrote a paper that spoke of the way sudden, violent loss left people imprinted with death anxiety and long-term psychic numbing.

I remember Eric talking for hours in his Cambridge apartment about a technique he had been using to help the people of Buffalo Creek. It was called the "collage method," and it involved getting survivors to paste together pictures, using anything they felt like clipping out of newspapers and magazines. It seemed childish to me at first, but Eric said that for people whose lives were in pieces anyway, collage was mysteriously satisfying. They would work for hours in silence, he said, moving about the floor, sticking things down, and sometimes when they had finished, they would contemplate what they had done and start to cry.

After 75 years of psychoanalysis — the talking cure — here was a therapy, Eric believed, that didn't start from words but from images. It seemed to unfurl the winding processes of a person's unconscious and lay them out flat on paper. Eric had been playing around with his father's camera and making photomontages since childhood. But he didn't

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Far left: The hotel where Eric (above with his father) says his father had neither "jumped" nor "fallen" from a 10th-floor window but was "dropped." Left: The summer before his death in 1953, Frank Olson may have visited secret research and testing facilities in Germany.

stumble on the power of collage until he was in his 20's. One stoned night, he and a girlfriend got down on their knees in her apartment and began cutting pictures out of magazines and gluing them down. When Eric finished, the central image of his collage was a grainy picture of a man falling head first out of a window.

ON JUNE 11, 1975, THE WASHINGTON POST REVEALED that a commission led by Vice President Nelson Rockefeller had discovered that "a civilian employee of the Department of the Army unwittingly took LSD as part of a Central Intelligence Agency test" and "developed serious side effects." After being sent to New York with a C.I.A. escort for psychiatric treatment, the employee jumped from a hotel window and died as a result. The Rockefeller report added a footnote: "There are indications in the few remaining agency records that this individual may have had a history of emotional instability."

Back in Frederick, Lisa Olson confronted Vincent Ruwet, her father's old boss at Detrick. He had regularly visited Alice Olson, shared a drink with her, become a trusted friend of the children. Ruwet stalled at first but eventually confirmed that the man in the story was Frank Olson and that he had known the details in The Post story all along.

If Ruwet had known all along, then the family had lived for 22 years in a community of lies: families of government scientists who had kept the truth away from a family dying from the lack of it. This culture of secrecy had also contaminated the family from within. Alice Olson covered the whole subject of Frank's death with a silence that was both baffling and intimidating. Her mantra, whenever Eric would ask what really happened in Room 1018A, was, "You are never going to know what happened in that room."

Maintaining stoic silence took its toll. By the 1960's, Alice Olson was routinely drinking on the quiet, locking herself in the bathroom and then coming out mean and confused. One time, when Eric returned from a year away in India, he walked right past her in the airport. The drinking had left her so thin and wasted that he didn't recognize her. All the time, Ruwet had been there for her, keeping her

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company. It later turned out that he had received orders from the C.I.A.'s director, Allen Dulles, to keep in touch with her.

With their mother locked in silence, the children were left alone with their own sense of shame about their father's death. Eric told other children that his father had suffered "a fatal nervous breakdown," without knowing what that could possibly mean. Thanks to The Post's revelations, the summer of 1975 was the family's "Copernican Revolution." They gave the exclusive on their personal story to Seymour Hersh of The New York Times, and when he came through the door of the house in Frederick, his first words were: "This must be the most uncurious family in the United States. I can't believe you fell for that story for 22 years." Later, at a news conference in the backyard at Frederick, under the big trees, the family announced that they were going to sue the government for wrongful death. Their ultimate purpose, they said, was to imprint what had happened to their father in "American memory."

The news conference had immediate results. On July 21, 1975, Alice, Eric, Nils, Lisa and Lisa's husband, Greg Hayward, were invited to the White House. In the Oval Office, according to newspaper accounts, President Gerald Ford expressed "the sympathy of the American people and apologized on behalf of the U.S. government." There is a photograph of Alice shaking the president's hand. Her face is glowing. Even so, catharsis was brief. The meeting with the president lasted 17 minutes.

A week or so later, Eric, Lisa, Nils and two lawyers met the C.I.A.'s director, William Colby, at the agency's headquarters in Langley, Va. In his memoirs, Colby remembered the lunch as "one of the most difficult assignments I have ever had." At the end of the lunch, Colby handed the family an inch-thick sheaf of declassified documents relating to Frank Olson's death. What Colby did not tell them — did not reveal until he published his memoirs just three years later — was that Frank Olson had not been a civilian employee of the Department of the Army. He had been a C.I.A. employee working at Fort Detrick.

The Colby documents were photocopies of the agency's own in-house investigation of Olson's death and like Eric's collages: a redacted jumble of fragments, full of unexplained terms like the "Artichoke" and "Bluebird" projects. These turned out to be the precursors of what became known as MK-ULTRA, a C.I.A. project, beginning in the Korean War, to explore the use of drugs like LSD as truth serums, as well as botulism and anthrax, for use in covert assassination.

The documents claimed that during a meeting between the C.I.A. and Fort Detrick scientists at Deep Creek Lodge in rural Maryland on Nov. 19, 1953, Sidney Gottlieb of the C.I.A. slipped LSD into Olson's glass of Cointreau. After 20 minutes, Olson developed mild symptoms of disorientation. He was then told the drink had been spiked. The next day, Olson returned home early and spent the weekend in a mood that Alice remembered as withdrawn but not remotely psychotic. He kept saying he had made a terrible mistake, but she couldn't get him to say what it was.

On Sunday night, they went to see a film about Martin Luther. It followed the young Luther to the moment of spiritual crisis — "Here I stand, I can do no other" — when he decided to take on the might of the Catholic Church. The next day, Olson went straight to Ruwet's office and said he wanted to resign. Ruwet told him to calm down. The next morning, he returned to Ruwet's office and insisted that his resignation be accepted. While Alice's memory was of Frank being in the

grip of an ethical dilemma, Ruwet told C.I.A. investigators that Olson "appeared to be greatly agitated and in his own words, 'all mixed up.'"

Ruwet and Robert Lashbrook, a C.I.A. liaison at Fort Detrick, took Olson to New York — ostensibly to seek psychiatric advice. But the doctor Olson saw, an allergist named Harold Abramson, was receiving C.I.A. financing to experiment with LSD, and his sole exercise of therapeutic attention was to prescribe Nembutal and bourbon to help Olson sleep.

Olson was also taken to see John Mulholland, a New York magician on the C.I.A. payroll, who may have tried to hypnotize him. Ruwet told C.I.A. investigators that in Mulholland's presence, Olson became highly agitated. "What's behind this?" he kept asking his friend Ruwet. "Give me the lowdown. What are they trying to do with me? Are they checking me for security?" "Everyone was in a plot to 'get' him," he told Lashbrook. He begged them to "just let me disappear."

According to the documents Colby had given the family, Olson spent an agonized night wandering the streets of New York, discarding his wallet and identification cards. He said he was too ashamed to go home to his wife and children, so he and Lashbrook ate a cheerless Thanksgiving dinner at a Horn & Hardart automat in Midtown.

Late the next day, according to the C.I.A. story, it was decided that Olson needed to be institutionalized. Yet when Olson phoned Alice that night, he said that he felt "much better" and "looked forward to seeing her the next day." That night, in Room 1018A, with Lashbrook in the bed by the door, Olson was calm: he washed out his socks and underwear and went to sleep. Four hours later, Armand Pastore found him lying on his back on Seventh Avenue.

The C.I.A.'s general counsel, called in immediately in 1953 to investigate Olson's death, noted that the official story — that LSD "triggered" the suicide — was "completely inconsistent" with the facts in the case. Disciplinary action was recommended against Gottlieb and Lashbrook, but the agency's director, Allen Dulles, delivered only a mild reprimand. Lashbrook left the agency, but Gottlieb remained in senior positions for 20 more years. He told the internal inquiry that Olson's death was "just one of the risks running with scientific experimentation." Far from ending with Olson's death, the LSD experiments continued for two decades.

The Colby documents left the family marooned, no longer believing that Frank's death was a simple suicide but not knowing what to believe instead. A photograph in People magazine in July 1975 shows each of them in the living room in Frederick, unsmiling and not looking at one another. In 1976, after negotiations in which they traded away their right to further civil or criminal proceedings against the government, the family received a total of \$750,000, half a million less than originally recommended by the White House and even the C.I.A. itself.

If this was "closure," it was of an especially cursed kind. Shortly after receiving her portion of the money, Eric's sister, together with her husband and their 2-year-old son, Jonathan, set off by small plane from Frederick to a destination in the Adirondacks, where they were going to invest the money in a lumber mill. The plane crashed, and everyone on board was killed.

IN THE AFTERMATH OF LISA'S DEATH, ERIC TOOK HIS PORTION OF THE money and went to Sweden to escape the accursed story. In Stockholm, he read intensively, exploring the connection between his spatial, collage-based theory of the mind and linguistic accounts of mental pro-

THE FAMILY HOME IS IN A DECAYED STATE OF SUSPENDED ANIMATION — SEEMINGLY THE SAME CARPETS, SAME COUCHES, SAME DUSTY JAR OF VASELINE IN THE BATHROOM CABINET THAT WERE THERE THE NIGHT FRANK OLSON DIED.

cesses. He also had a son, Stephan, by a woman he never married. If distance was supposed to heal him, however, the cure didn't work. He "smoldered" in Stockholm and in 1984 returned to the States determined, he said, to find out the truth "once and for all."

"Once and for all" meant returning to the hotel and checking into Room 1018A. He recalls this strange night now as a revelation. "It just hit you," he says. The room was simply too small for his father to have gained the speed to take a running plunge through the window. The sill was too high and too wide — there was a radiator in front of it — for him to have dived through a closed window and a lowered blind in the dark.

Eric, Nils and Alice, now recovered from alcoholism, tracked down Sidney Gottlieb in his ecologically correct home in Culpeper, Va., where the retired spy master was raising goats, eating yogurt and preaching the values of peace and environmentalism. He received them pleasantly but conceded nothing. "I was outclassed," Eric remembers. "This was a world-class intelligence." They also found Lashbrook, at his vine-covered stucco house in Ojai, Calif., where they watched him twitch in his seat as he told his version of what happened in room 1018A — that he was awakened by a crash, saw a broken window and an empty bed and concluded that Frank Olson had jumped to his death.

From these encounters, Eric realized that he was up against a brotherhood of silence and that his father had once belonged to it. It was, as one former Detrick employee called it, "a community of saints" dedicated to using the most fearful and secret science to defend the republic.

FRANK OLSON'S SPECIALTY, IT TURNED OUT, HAD BEEN the development of aerosols for the delivery of anthrax. With the discovery in the 1950's that the North Koreans were brainwashing American prisoners, the Special Operations Division at Detrick became the center for the development of drugs for use in brainwashing and interrogation. LSD emerged as one of the interrogation drugs of choice. Alice Olson never knew exactly what her husband was doing — he was, in fact, working for the C.I.A. by this time — but she did know that whenever his lab tested chemical or biological compounds on monkeys and the monkeys died, her husband would bring a testy silence home.

One mystery — entry and exit stamps in Frank Olson's passport, indicating that he had been to Sweden, Germany and Britain in the summer of 1953 — seemed to offer a crucial clue to his state of mind in the months before his death. Through Gordon Thomas, a British journalist and author of numerous books on intelligence matters, Eric learned that during a trip to London his father had apparently confided in William Sargant, a consultant psychiatrist who advised British intelligence on brainwashing techniques.

According to Thomas, who was a lifelong friend of Sargant's, Olson told Sargant that he had visited secret joint American-British testing and research installations near Frankfurt. Thomas's hypothesis is that the C.I.A. was testing interrogation and truth serums there — not on monkeys but on human subjects, "expendables," captured Russian agents and ex-Nazis. Thomas says that Olson confessed to Sargant that he had witnessed something terrible, possibly "a terminal experiment" on one or more of the expendables. Sargant heard Olson out

and then reported to British intelligence that the young American scientist's misgivings were making him a security risk. He recommended that Olson be denied further access to Porton Down, the British chemical-weapons research establishment.

A document Eric later saw from his father's personnel file confirmed that doubts had been raised about Olson's security clearance before his death, possibly because of Sargant's warning. Alice Olson, who knew nothing about the nature of his visit, did recall that when he returned from Europe that summer, Frank was unusually withdrawn.

Olson, a scientist by training, would have known that he was working for a government that had put Nazi scientists on trial at Nuremberg for immoral experiments on human beings. Now, in the late summer of 1953, his son says he believes, a naïve American patriot faced up to the possibility that his own government was doing the same thing. If the C.I.A. was in fact experimenting with "expendables" in Germany, and if Olson knew about it, Eric reasoned, then it would not be enough to hospitalize him, discredit him with lies about his mental condition and allow him to slip back into civilian life. It would be better to get rid of him altogether but make it look like suicide. This was the truth, Eric came to believe, that lay hidden in the collage of the Colby documents.

If Eric is right, slipping LSD into Olson's Cointreau was not an experiment that went wrong; it was designed to get him to talk while hallucinating. The trip to New York was not to manage and contain his incipient psychosis. It was intended to assess what kind of risk he posed and then eliminate him if necessary. Housing a possibly deranged and desperate man in a hotel room high above Seventh Avenue was not a regrettable error of judgment. It was the prelude to murder. If Frank Olson had realized this, his son could now read his father's last words ("Just let me disappear") as a cry for help.

In 1997, after the C.I.A. inadvertently declassified an assassination manual dating from late 1953, Eric Olson was able to read the following: "The most efficient accident, in simple assassination, is a fall of 75 feet or more onto a hard surface. Elevator shafts, stairwells, unscreened windows and bridges will serve. . . . The act may be executed by sudden, vigorous [excised] of the ankles, tipping the subject over the edge." The manual went on to recommend a blow to the temple to stun the subject first: "In chase cases it will usually be necessary to stun or drug the subject before dropping him."

Reading this passage at the kitchen table in Frederick, Eric realized that the word he had been looking for all his life was not "fallen" or "jumped" but "dropped." It was, he recalled, one of the few moments when, after nearly 50 years, he actually experienced his father's death, when the truth he had been seeking finally took hold of him.

In allowing the Olson family to receive the ultimate sacrament of American healing — a formal apology from the president in the Oval Office — the C.I.A. tacitly acknowledged that it had committed a sin against the order that holds citizens in allegiance to their government. Now, it seemed to Eric Olson, that apology had been a cynical lie. It enabled the C.I.A. to hide, forever, a perfect murder.

It is one thing to believe in a truth as painful as this. It is another to prove it. In 1994, Eric had his father's casket raised from the ground. At the funeral in 1953, the coffin was shut because the family had been told that the body was broken up and that there were extensive cuts and lac-



Clockwise from top: In July 1975, Frank Olson's family received an apology for his death from President Ford. One of the children scribbled on their father's obituary from the local paper. A family photo (Eric is the Scout) taken not long before Olson's death.

erations to the face caused by the fall through the glass. In fact, the body had been embalmed, and it was in nearly perfect condition.

Eric stared down at a face he had last seen 41 years before. There were no lacerations consistent with damage by glass. On further examination, the forensic team, led by James Starrs of George Washington University, discovered a blow to Olson's temple, on the left side, which caused a fist-size bleed under the otherwise unbroken skin. It could not have occurred, the pathologists agreed, after he went out the window because the velocity of his descent would have caused more extensive trauma. While one team member thought it could have occurred as the head hit the window frame on the way out, Starrs and the others were certain it had been inflicted before that. The conclusion that both Starrs and Eric drew was that someone had knocked Olson out, either while he slept or after a struggle, and then thrown him out the window.

Since the autopsy, Eric has pursued leads to find out who actually carried out "the wet work" on his father. H.P. Albarelli, a writer-researcher with contacts among retired C.I.A. agents in Florida, has found agents who say they know the identity of the men who went into Room 1018A that night in November 1953, supposedly to tip Olson through the window. They were not C.I.A. men, they say, but contract killers associated with the Trafficante mob family hired by the C.I.A. But none of the retired C.I.A. agents, men now in their 70's and 80's, are about to come forward unless they are released from their confidentiality agreements with the agency.

In 1996, Olson approached Manhattan's district attorney, Robert Morgenthau, to see if his office would open a new investigation into the Olson case. Stephen Saracco and Daniel Bibb of Morgenthau's "cold case" unit have deposed Lashbrook in Ojai; they have followed up a few of the hundreds of leads that Eric Olson besieges them with almost daily. But the Manhattan D.A., while probably agreeable to immunity for Albarelli's sources in Florida, has not pursued the confi-

dentiality releases. If you talk to Saracco and Bibb in the Italian restaurant in lower Manhattan where they hang out after-hours, you get the impression that they don't think there's a case to send to a grand jury. If you ask them why they don't go down to Florida to talk to Albarelli's jealously guarded sources, they look at you as if to say, "How do you know these people exist?"

If there isn't enough for the Manhattan D.A. to take to a jury, Eric and his lawyer, Harry Huge, will have to bring a civil suit of their own, claiming that the C.I.A. lied in 1976 when it secured the family's agreement to waive further legal proceedings. Eric says he knows the truth, but it is not the "smoking gun" kind of forensic truth that will force the agency to go to court and be put through the discovery process. And if you lack provable truth, you do not get justice. Without justice, there is no accountability, and without accountability there is no healing, no resolution.

LAST AUTUMN, AFTER NEARLY 25 YEARS OF OUR LIVES GOING IN DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS, I went to see Eric in Frederick. The family home, a ranch house, is in a decayed state of suspended animation — seemingly the same carpets, same couches, same dusty jar of Vaseline in the bathroom cabinet that were there the night Frank Olson died. Living there is worst at Thanksgiving, the time of his death.

Eric has taken a break from his work on the collage method, and the huge books of patients' collages now lie shut up in storage nearby. The house is full of drafts of books on collage, as well as books about his father's story that remain unfinished because the story itself lacks an ending. Eric lives on foundation grants, book advances and some help from his brother and others. He spends his days hounding journalists, the Manhattan D.A., anyone who will listen, with a steady stream of calls and e-mail messages from an office just feet away from the same living room, the same chair, the very spot where he was told by Ruwert that his father had "fallen or jumped." That he is convinced that the word was neither "fallen" nor "jumped," but "dropped," does not heal. Indeed, his story makes you wonder about that noble phrase "The truth shall make you free." As it happens, that phrase is inscribed in the entry hall of the C.I.A.'s headquarters.

Eric knows that to charge the most secretive agency of American government with murder is to incur the suspicion that you have become deranged by anger, grief, paranoia, greed or a combination of all four. "Eric is crazy, Eric is obsessed," he says, mimicking his accusers. "Fine. I agree." A maniacal cackle. "But it's not the point. The point is" — and here his eyes go flat and cold and relentless — "what happened in the damned room."

Just before I left, we went to the graves of his mother, sister and brother-in-law and their child, the place where he wants his father to be buried. When I asked him when the reburial will happen, he paused to think. "When we know what to say," he said finally, looking down at the spare piece of grass beside his mother's grave. "When it is over. When we can do it right."

It takes me a while after I leave Eric to grasp one salient fact that may make resolution difficult. For seven years, his father's bones have lain in a filing cabinet in James Starrs's office. Only the bones — and not all of them — remain intact. To get at the truth of what happened to Frank Olson, the pathologists had to rip the skin off his limbs and tear his body apart, macerate it and send it in chunks to various labs for analysis. In the search for truth, Eric had to tear his father's body limb from limb.

The fact is, it will never be possible to bury all of Frank Olson again. Now I understand why, when I asked Eric what he had learned from his 25-year ordeal, he told me that no one should ever dig up his father's body. Now I know why my friend's wild laugh is so full of pain. ■