

One night in June 2014, Derek Broaddus had just finished an evening of painting at his new home in Westfield, New Jersey, when he went outside to check the mail. Derek and his wife, Maria, had closed on the six-bedroom house at 657 Boulevard three days earlier and were doing some renovations before they moved in, so there wasn't much in the mail except a few bills and a white, card-shaped envelope. It was addressed in thick, clunky handwriting to "The New Owner," and the typed note inside began warmly:

*Dearest new neighbor at 657 Boulevard,
Allow me to welcome you to the neighborhood.*

For the Broadduses, buying 657 Boulevard had fulfilled a dream. Maria was raised in Westfield, and the house was a few blocks from her childhood home. Derek grew up working class in Maine, then moved his way up the ladder at an insurance company in Manhattan to become a senior vice-president with a salary large enough to afford the \$1.3 million house. The Broadduses had bought 657 Boulevard just after Derek celebrated his 40th birthday, and their three kids were already debating which of the house's fireplaces Santa Claus would use.

But as Derek kept reading the letter from his new neighbor, it took a turn. "How did you end up here?" the writer asked. "Did 657 Boulevard call to you with its force within?" The letter went on:

657 Boulevard has been the subject of my family for decades now and as it approaches its 110th birthday, I have been put in charge of watching and waiting for its second coming. My grandfather watched the house in the 1920s and my father watched in the 1960s. It is now my time. Do you know the history of the house? Do you know what lies within the walls of 657 Boulevard? Why are you here? I will find out.

The author's reconnaissance had apparently already begun. The letter identified the Broadduses' Honda minivan, as well as the

workers renovating the home. "I see already that you have flooded 657 Boulevard with contractors so that you can destroy the house as it was supposed to be," the person wrote. "Tsk, tsk, tsk ... bad move. You don't want to make 657 Boulevard unhappy." Earlier in the week, Derek and Maria had gone to the house and chatted with their new neighbors while their children, who were 5, 8, and 10 years old, ran around the backyard with several kids from the neighborhood. The letter writer seemed to have noticed. "You have children. I have seen them. So far I think there are three that I have counted," the anonymous correspondent wrote, before asking if there were "more on the way":

Do you need to fill the house with the young blood I requested? Better for me. Was your old house too small for the growing family? Or was it greed to bring me your children? Once I know their names I will call to them and draw them too [sic] me.

The envelope had no return address. "Who am I?" the person wrote. "There are hundreds and hundreds of cars that drive by 657 Boulevard each day. Maybe I am in one. Look at all the windows you can see from 657 Boulevard. Maybe I am in one. Look out any of the many windows in 657 Boulevard at all the people who stroll by each day. Maybe I am one." The letter concluded with a suggestion that this message would not be the last — "Welcome my friends, welcome. Let the party begin" — followed by a signature typed in a cursive font: "The Watcher."

It was after 10 p.m., and Derek Broaddus was alone. He raced around the house, turning off lights so no one could see inside, then called the Westfield Police Department. An officer came to the house, read the letter, and said, "What the fuck is this?" He asked Derek if he had enemies and recommended moving a piece of construction equipment from the back porch in case The Watcher tried to toss it through a window.

Derek rushed back to his wife and kids, who were living at their old home elsewhere in Westfield. That night, Derek and Maria wrote an email to John and Andrea Woods, the couple who sold them 657 Boulevard, to ask if they had any idea who The Watcher might be or why he or she had written, “I asked the Woods to bring me young blood and it looks like they listened.”

Andrea Woods replied the next morning: A few days before moving out, the Woodses had also received a letter from “The Watcher.” The note had been “odd,” she said, and made similar mention of The Watcher’s family observing the house over time, but Andrea said she and her husband had never received anything like it in their 23 years in the house and had thrown the letter away without much thought. That day, the Woodses went with Maria to the police station, where Detective Leonard Lugo told her not to tell anyone about the letters, including her new neighbors, most of whom she had never met — and all of whom were now suspects.

The Broadduses spent the coming weeks on high alert. Derek canceled a work trip, and whenever Maria took the kids to their new house, she would yell their names if they wandered into a corner of the yard. When Derek gave a tour of the renovation to a couple on the block, he froze when the wife said, “It’ll be nice to have some young blood in the neighborhood.” The Broadduses’ general contractor arrived one morning to find that a heavy sign he’d hammered into the front yard had been ripped out overnight.

Two weeks after the letter arrived, Maria stopped by the house to look at some paint samples and check the mail. She recognized the thick black lettering on a card-shaped envelope and called the police. “Welcome again to your new home at 657 Boulevard,” The Watcher wrote. “The workers have been busy and I have been watching you unload carfuls of your personal belongings. The dumpster is a nice

touch. Have they found what is in the walls yet? In time they will.”

This time, The Watcher had addressed Derek and Maria directly, misspelling their names as “Mr. and Mrs. Braddus.” Had The Watcher been close enough to hear one of the Broadduses’ contractors addressing them? The Watcher boasted of having learned a lot about the family in the preceding weeks, especially about their children. The letter identified the Broadduses’ three kids by birth order and by their nicknames — the ones Maria had been yelling. “I am pleased to know your names now and the name of the young blood you have brought to me,” it said. “You certainly say their names often.” The letter asked about one child in particular, whom the writer had seen using an easel inside an enclosed porch: “Is she the artist in the family?”

The letter continued:

657 Boulevard is anxious for you to move in. It has been years and years since the young blood ruled the hallways of the house. Have you found all of the secrets it holds yet? Will the young blood play in the basement? Or are they too afraid to go down there alone. I would [be] very afraid if I were them. It is far away from the rest of the house. If you were upstairs you would never hear them scream.

Will they sleep in the attic? Or will you all sleep on the second floor? Who has the bedrooms facing the street? I’ll know as soon as you move in. It will help me to know who is in which bedroom. Then I can plan better.

All of the windows and doors in 657 Boulevard allow me to watch you and track you as you move through the house. Who am I? I am the Watcher and have been in control of 657 Boulevard for the better part of two decades now. The Woods family turned it over to you. It was their time to move on and kindly sold it when I asked them to.

I pass by many times a day. 657 Boulevard is my job, my life, my obsession. And now you are

too Braddus family. Welcome to the product of your greed! Greed is what brought the past three families to 657 Boulevard and now it has brought you to me.

Have a happy moving in day. You know I will be watching.

Derek and Maria stopped bringing their kids to the house. They were no longer sure when, or if, they would move in. Several weeks later, a third letter arrived. “Where have you gone to?” The Watcher wrote. “657 Boulevard is missing you.”

Many Westfield residents compare their town to Mayberry, the idyllic setting for *The Andy Griffith Show* — the kind of place where a new neighbor might greet you with a welcoming note. Westfield is 45 minutes from New York and a bit too slow for singles, meaning the town’s 30,000 residents are largely well-to-do families. This year, Bloomberg ranked Westfield the 99th-richest city in America — but only the 18th wealthiest in New Jersey — and in 2014, when The Watcher struck, the website NeighborhoodScout named it the country’s 30th-safest town. The most pressing local issues of late, according to residents, have been the temporary closure of Trader Joe’s after a roof collapse and the rampant scourge of “unconstitutional policing,” by which they mean aggressive parking enforcement. (Westfield is 86 percent white.)

One activity all locals recognized as treacherous is trying to buy a house. “There’s a lot of money and a lot of ego,” one resident, who requested anonymity before discussing Westfield real estate, told me. “I’ve seen bidding wars where friends lost by \$300,000.” The Broadduses’ house was on the Boulevard, a wide, tree-lined street with some of the more desirable homes in town, as The Watcher had noted: “The Boulevard used to be THE street to live on ... You made it if you lived on the Boulevard.”

Built in 1905, 657 Boulevard was perhaps the grandest home on the block, and when the Woodses put it on the market, they had received multiple offers above their asking price. That led the Broadduses to initially suspect that The Watcher might be someone upset over losing out on the house. But the Woodses said one interested buyer had backed out after a bad medical diagnosis, while another had already found a different home. In an email to the Broadduses, Andrea Woods proposed another theory: “Would the mention of the contractor trucks [and] your children suggest that it was someone in the neighborhood?”

The letters did indicate proximity. They had been processed in Kearny, the U.S. Postal Service’s distribution center in northern New Jersey. The first was postmarked June 4, before the sale was public — the Woodses had never put up a for sale sign — and only a day after the contractors arrived. The renovations were mostly interior, and people who lived nearby say they didn’t notice an unusual commotion, even from the jackhammering in the basement. When Derek and Maria walked Detective Lugo around the house, they showed him that the easel on the porch was hidden from the street by vegetation, making it difficult to see unless someone was behind the house or right next door.

A few days after the first letter, Maria and Derek went to a barbecue across the street welcoming them and another new homeowner to the block. The Broadduses hadn’t told anyone about The Watcher, as the police had instructed, and found themselves scanning the party for clues while keeping tabs on their kids, who ran guilelessly through a crowd that made up much of the suspect pool. “We kept screaming at them to stay close,” Maria said. “People must have thought we were crazy.”

At one point, Derek was chatting with John Schmidt, who lived two doors down, when Schmidt told him about the Langfords, who lived between them. Peggy Langford was in her

90s, and several of her adult children, all in their 60s, lived with her. The family was a bit odd, Schmidt said, but harmless. He described one of the younger Langfords, Michael, who didn't work and had a beard like Ernest Hemingway, as "kind of a Boo Radley character."

Derek thought the case was solved. The Langford house was right next to the easel on the porch. The family had lived there since the 1960s, when The Watcher's father, the letters said, had begun observing 657 Boulevard. Richard Langford, the family patriarch, had died 12 years earlier, and the current Watcher claimed to have been on the job for "the better part of two decades."

When the Broadduses told Lugo about the family, he said he already knew, and a week after the first letter arrived, he brought Michael Langford to police headquarters for an interview. Michael denied knowing anything about the letters, but the Broadduses say that Lugo told them that "the narrative" of what he said matched things mentioned in the letters. "This isn't *CSI: Westfield*," Lugo later told the Broadduses. "When the wife is dead, it's the husband."

But there wasn't much hard evidence, and after a few weeks, the police chief told the Broadduses that, short of an admission, there wasn't much the department could do. "This is someone who threatened my kids, and the police are saying, 'Probably nothing's gonna happen,'" Derek said. "Probably isn't good enough for me." After the second letter, Derek told the cops that if they didn't take care of the situation, they would have a different kind of case on their hands. "This person attacked my family, and where I'm from, if you do that, you get your ass beat," Derek told me.

Frustrated, the Broadduses began their own investigation. Derek became especially obsessed. He set up webcams in 657 Boulevard and spent nights crouched in the dark, watching to see if anyone was watching the house at

close range. "Maria thought I was crazy," he told me recently at a coffee shop in Manhattan, where he covered a table with documents relating to the case, including copies of the letters, which he and his wife had shared with only a few friends and family members. He showed me a map displaying when each of 657's neighbors had moved in — the Langfords were the only ones there since the '60s — with overlays marking possible sight lines for the easel and a circle for "Approximate Range of 'Ear Shot'" to estimate who might have heard Maria yelling their kids' names. Only a few homes fit both criteria.

The Broadduses also turned to several experts. They employed a private investigator, who staked out the neighborhood and ran background checks on the Langfords but didn't find anything noteworthy. Derek reached out to a former FBI agent who served as the inspiration for Clarice Starling in *The Silence of the Lambs* — they were on a high-school board of trustees together — and they also hired Robert Lenehan, another former FBI agent, to conduct a threat assessment. Lenehan recognized several old-fashioned tics in the letters that pointed to an older writer. The envelope was addressed to "M/M Braddus," the salutations included the day's weather — "Warm and humid," "Sunny and cool for a summer day" — and the sentences had double spaces between them. The letters had a certain literary panache, which suggested a "voracious reader," and a surprising lack of profanity given the level of anger, which Lenehan thought meant a "less macho" writer. Maybe, he wondered, The Watcher had seen *The Watcher*, starring Keanu Reeves as a serial killer who stalks the detective trying to catch him?

Lenehan didn't think The Watcher was likely to act on the threats, but the letters had enough typos and errors to imply a certain erraticism. (The first letter was dated "Tuesday, June 4th," but that day was a Wednesday.) There was also

a “seething anger” directed at the wealthy in particular. The Watcher was upset by new money moving into town — “Are you one of those Hoboken transplants who are ruining Westfield?” — and by the Broadduses’ relatively modest renovations:

The house is crying from all of the pain it is going through. You have changed it and made it so fancy. You are stealing it’s [sic] history. It cries for the past and what used to be in the time when I roamed it’s [sic] halls. The 1960s were a good time for 657 Boulevard when I ran from room to room imagining the life with the rich occupants there. The house was full of life and young blood. Then it got old and so did my father. But he kept watching until the day he died. And now I watch and wait for the day when the young blood will be mine again.

Lenahan recommended looking into former housekeepers or their descendants. Perhaps The Watcher was jealous that the Broadduses had bought a home that the writer couldn’t afford.

But the focus remained on the Langfords. In cooperation with Westfield police, the Broadduses sent a letter to the Langfords announcing plans to tear down the house, hoping to prompt a response. (Nothing happened.) Detective Lugo brought Michael Langford in for a second interview but got nowhere, and his sister, Abby, accused the police of harassing their family. Eventually, the Broadduses hired Lee Levitt, a lawyer, who met with several members of the Langford family, as well as their attorney, to show them the letters, along with photos explaining how their home was one of the few vantage points from which the easel could be seen. The meeting grew tense, Levitt told me, and the Langfords insisted Michael was innocent. One night, Derek had a dream in which he confronted Peggy, the eldest Langford, and demanded she build an eight-foot fence between the properties.

Maria was having other kinds of dreams. One night, she woke up to an especially vivid one about a man who lived nearby. “He was wearing these boots and carrying a pitchfork and calling to the kids and I couldn’t get to them in time,” Maria said. She thought almost anyone could be The Watcher, which made daily life feel like navigating a labyrinth of threats. She probed the faces of shoppers at Trader Joe’s to see if they looked strangely at her kids and spent hours Googling anyone who seemed suspicious.

There were reasons to consider other suspects. For one thing, the police spoke to Michael before the second letter was sent, which would make sending two more especially reckless. (The Broadduses say that Lugo told them they wouldn’t receive any more letters after he spoke to Michael.) Then there was the rest of the neighborhood to consider. The private investigator found two child sex offenders within a few blocks. Bill Woodward, the Broadduses’ housepainter, had also noticed something strange. The couple behind 657 Boulevard kept a pair of lawn chairs strangely close to the Broadduses’ property. “One day, I was looking out the window and I saw this older guy sitting in one of the chairs,” Woodward told me. “He wasn’t facing his house — he was facing the Broadduses.’ ”

But by the end of 2014, the investigation had stalled. The Watcher had left no digital trail, no fingerprints, and no way to place someone at the scene of a crime that could have been hatched from pretty much any mailbox in northern New Jersey. The letters could be read closely for possible clues, or dismissed as the nonsensical ramblings of a sociopath. “It was like trying to find a needle in a haystack,” said Scott Kraus, who helped investigate the case for the Union County Prosecutor’s Office. In December, the Westfield police told the Broadduses they had run out of options. Derek showed

the letters to his priest, who agreed to bless the house.

The renovations to 657 Boulevard, including a new alarm system, were finished within a few months. But the idea of moving in filled the Broadduses with overwhelming anxiety. Could they let their kids play outside or have friends over? Would they get a new letter every week? Derek priced out trained German shepherds and posted a job on a website for military veterans — “All you have to do is work out in the backyard every day” — but the Broadduses hadn’t bought 657 to feel bunkered in a fortress. “At the end of the day, it came down to, *What are you willing to risk?*” Maria told me. “We weren’t going to put our kids in harm’s way.” Derek had been responding to occasional alarms at the house, sometimes in the middle of the night, bringing a knife with him just in case. “They were so joyous about their new home, and then within days, they were petrified,” Bill Woodward, the painter, said. “I’m a stranger, and Maria was crying and shaking in my arms.” It didn’t help that The Watcher seemed to be getting more and more unhinged:

657 Boulevard is turning on me. It is coming after me. I don’t understand why. What spell did you cast on it? It used to be my friend and now it is my enemy. I am in charge of 657 Boulevard. It is not in charge of me. I will fend off its bad things and wait for it to become good again. It will not punish me. I will rise again. I will be patient and wait for this to pass and for you to bring the young blood back to me. 657 Boulevard needs young blood. It needs you. Come back. Let the young blood play again like I once did. Let the young blood sleep in 657 Boulevard. Stop changing it and let it alone.

The Broadduses had sold their old home, so they moved in with Maria’s parents while continuing to pay the mortgage and property taxes on 657 Boulevard. “I had to do things like shovel the driveway,” Derek said. “Just picture that little indignity: I’d go at five in the morning, then come back and do it again at my in-laws.” They told only a handful of friends about the letters, which left others to ask why

they weren’t moving in — “Legal issues,” they said — and wonder if they were getting divorced. They fought constantly and started taking medication to fall asleep. “I was a depressed wreck,” Derek said. Maria decided to see a therapist after a routine doctor’s visit that began with the question “How are you?” caused her to burst into tears. The therapist said she was suffering post-traumatic stress that wouldn’t go away until they got rid of the house.

Six months after the letters arrived, the Broadduses decided to sell 657 Boulevard. They initially listed it for more than they paid, to reflect the renovations they’d done. But few worlds are more gossipy than suburban New Jersey real estate, and rumors had already begun to swirl about why the house sat empty. One broker emailed to say her client “loved” it but that “there are so many unsubstantiated rumors flying around,” ranging “from sexual predator to stalker,” that they needed to know more. The Broadduses sent a partial disclosure mentioning the letters to interested buyers and told Coldwell Banker, their Realtor, that they intended to show the full letters to anyone whose offer was accepted. Several preliminary bids came in well below the asking price, but the Broadduses weren’t ready to take such a financial hit and only wanted to share the letters with likely buyers. No one got that far, even after they lowered the price. A Coldwell agent who hadn’t read the letters told them in an email that they were being unnecessarily forthcoming — “My friend got horrible threatening letters about her dog barking and she didn’t think to disclose” — but the Broadduses insisted. “I don’t know how you live through what we did and think you could do it to somebody else,” Derek said.

Derek and Maria thought about what they would have done had the previous owners told them about their letter from The Watcher. The Woodses, both retired scientists, told the Broadduses that they remembered the letter they received as more strange than threatening,

thanking them for taking care of the house. They say they never had any issues. “We certainly never felt ‘watched,’” Andrea told them. They rarely even locked the doors.

But the Broadduses felt the name alone was ominous enough to merit mentioning to a new family moving in, and on June 2, 2015, a year after buying 657 Boulevard, they filed a legal complaint against the Woodses, arguing that the Woodses should have disclosed the letter just as they had the fact that water sometimes got in the basement. The Broadduses say they hoped to reach a quiet settlement. Their kids still didn’t know about The Watcher, and their lawyer assured them that, at most, a small legal newswire might pick up the story.

“We do some creepy stories,” Tamron Hall said on the *Today* show a few weeks later. “This might be top-ten creepy.” A local reporter had found the complaint, which included snippets of The Watcher’s menacing threats, and after a belated attempt by the Broadduses to seal it, the story went viral. News trucks camped out at 657 Boulevard, and one local reporter set up a lawn chair to conduct his own watch. The Broadduses got more than 300 media requests, but with advice from a crisis-management consultant referred by one of Derek’s colleagues, they decided not to speak publicly to spare their kids even more attention. They vacated Westfield and went to a friend’s beach house. (They didn’t find much peace: Maria’s grandfather had a heart attack, and the friend they were staying with had a grand-mal seizure.) Eventually, Derek and Maria sat down with their children to explain the real reason they hadn’t moved into their home. The kids had plenty of questions — Who is The Watcher? Where does this person live? Why is this person angry with us? — to which Derek and Maria had few answers. “Can you imagine having that conversation with a 5-year-old?” Derek told me. “Your town isn’t as safe as you think it is, and there’s a boogeyman obsessed with you.”

From a safer distance, The Watcher was a real-life mystery to solve. A commenter on nj.com suggested ground-penetrating radar to find whatever The Watcher claimed was in the walls. (The home inspector had already looked and told Derek the only issue was the aging home’s lack of insulation.) A group of Reddit users obsessed over Google Maps’ Street View, which showed a car parked in front of 657 that one user thought had “a man holding a camera in the driver’s seat.” (Others, more rationally, saw “pixelated glare.”) The range of proposed suspects included a jilted mistress, a spurned Realtor, a local high-schooler’s creative-writing project, guerrilla marketing for a horror movie, and “mall goths having fun.” Some people just thought the Broadduses were wimps for not moving in — “I would NEVER let this sicko stop me from moving into a house. Never back down from a TERRORIST” — which irked the Broadduses. “None of them have read the letters or had their children threatened by someone they didn’t know,” Derek said. “To decide whether this person’s only nuts enough to write these letters and not to do something — what if something did happen?”

In Westfield, people were on edge. Laurie Clancy, who teaches piano lessons in her house behind 657 Boulevard, told me one of her students came for a lesson shortly after news of The Watcher broke and started bawling. “She was terrified to walk down the Boulevard,” Clancy said. At the first Westfield town-council meeting after the letters became public, Mayor Andy Skibitksy assured the public that The Watcher hadn’t been heard from in a year and that even though the police hadn’t solved the case, their investigation had been “exhaustive.”

This was news to 657’s neighbors, most of whom had never heard from the cops. “We are confounded as to how a thorough investigation can be conducted without talking to all the neighbors with proximity to the home,” several of them wrote in a letter to the local paper.

Under the glare of national attention, Barron Chambliss, a veteran detective in the Westfield police, was asked to look at the case. “The Broadduses are victims, and I don’t think they got the support they needed,” Chambliss, who has since retired, told me recently of the initial investigation.

Chambliss knew his colleagues had looked closely at Michael Langford. According to his brother Sandy Langford, Michael had been diagnosed with schizophrenia as a young man. He sometimes spooked newcomers to the neighborhood when he did strange things, like walk through their backyard or peek into the windows of homes that were being renovated. But those who knew him told me that the odd things he did were mostly just unusual neighborly kindnesses. “He goes out and gets the newspapers for me every morning,” said John Schmidt, who lives next door. People who had known Michael for decades told me they didn’t think he was capable of writing the letters.

As Chambliss looked into the case, he discovered something surprising: Investigators had eventually conducted a DNA analysis on one of the envelopes and determined that the DNA belonged to a woman. Chambliss decided to look more closely at Abby Langford, Michael’s sister, who worked as a real-estate agent. Was she upset about missing a commission right next door? She also worked at the local Lord & Taylor, and Chambliss coordinated with a security guard there to nab her plastic water bottle during a shift. But Chambliss says the DNA sample was not a match. Not long after, the prosecutor’s office gave Derek and Maria some unexpected news: They wouldn’t say why or how, but they had ruled out the Langfords as suspects.

The Broadduses were stunned. They had recently told the prosecutors that they planned to file civil charges against the Langfords and wondered if the prosecutors were lying to prevent the story from blowing up again. “My

family moved to the Boulevard in 1961, and we never caused a problem for anybody,” Sandy Langford told me. “This guy gets all these letters, and all of a sudden people are pointing fingers.”

Left without a suspect, the Broadduses reopened their personal investigation. They were still coy about sharing too much with their neighbors, who remained in the pool of suspects, but spent an afternoon walking the block with a picture of The Watcher’s handwritten envelope. They hoped someone might recognize the writing from a Christmas card, but the only notable encounter came when an older man who lived behind 657 said his son joked that The Watcher sounded a little bit like him. A neighbor across the street was the CEO of Kroll, the security firm, and the Broadduses hired the company to look for handwriting matches, but they found nothing. They also hired Robert Leonard, a renowned forensic linguist — and former member of the band Sha Na Na — who didn’t find any noteworthy overlap when he scoured local online forums for similarities to The Watcher’s writing, although he did think the author might watch *Game of Thrones*. (Jon Snow is one of the “Watchers on the Wall.”) At one point, Derek persuaded a friend in tech to connect him to a hacker willing to try breaking into Wi-Fi networks in the neighborhood to look for incriminating documents, but doing so turned out to be both illegal and more difficult than the movies made it seem, so they didn’t go through with it.

Chambliss and the Westfield police were also back at square one. The cops asked Andrea Woods for a DNA sample and interviewed her 21-year-old son, who was surprised to find that he suddenly seemed to be a suspect. A year after the fact, it was hard to find fresh leads, and the initial police canvas had been so porous that it had missed a significant clue: Around the same time that the Broadduses had received their first letter, another family on the Boulevard got a similar note from The

Watcher. The parents of that family had lived in their house for years and their kids were grown, so they threw the letter away just as the Woodses had. But after the news broke, one of their children posted about it on Facebook, then deleted the post. When investigators spoke to the family, they confirmed that the letter had been similar to the Broadduses'. But its existence only made the case more confusing. "There wasn't a whole lot to go on," Chambliss told me.

One night, Chambliss and a partner were sitting in the back of a van parked on Boulevard, watching the house through a pair of binoculars. Around 11 p.m., a car stopped in front of the house long enough for Chambliss to grow suspicious. He says he traced the car to a young woman in a nearby town whose boyfriend lived on the same block as 657. The woman told Chambliss her boyfriend was into "some really dark video games," including, in Chambliss's memory, one in which he was playing as a specific character: "The Watcher." As for the female DNA, Chambliss figured the girlfriend, or someone else, could have helped. The boyfriend was living elsewhere at the time, but Chambliss says he agreed to come in for an interview on two separate occasions. He didn't show up either time. Chambliss didn't have enough evidence to compel him to appear, and with the media attention dying down, he dropped the case and moved on.

While the Broadduses continued to be consumed by stress and fear, for the rest of Westfield, the story became little more than a creepy urban legend — a house to walk by on Halloween if you were brave enough. No one who had lived in the house before the Woodses could recall anything unusual, and it was hard for people to imagine that their idyllic neighborhood could be host to something so sinister. A woman who lives nearby told me that, after the news broke, she and ten or so of her neighbors had gathered in the street to puzzle out who might have sent the letters. Eventually, she said, they came to a consensus:

Maybe the Broadduses had sent the letters to themselves?

The theory, so far as it went, was that the Broadduses had suffered buyer's remorse, or realized they couldn't afford the home, and concocted an elaborate scheme to get out of the sale. Or Derek was cooking up some kind of insurance fraud. Or they were angling for a movie deal. (The Broadduses received several offers but turned them down; Lifetime eventually released a movie called *The Watcher*, despite a cease-and-desist letter from the Broadduses, arguing that the couple in its movie was biracial and the letters were signed "the Raven.") Some locals found it noteworthy that over the course of a decade, the Broadduses had upgraded from a \$315,000 house to a \$770,000 house to a \$1.3 million one and refinanced their mortgages. A few weeks after the letters became public, the Westfield *Leader* published an article in which anonymous neighbors were quoted asking why the Broadduses kept renovating a home they weren't moving into, or questioning whether they had really done that much renovating at all. The *Leader* even cast doubt on Maria's commitment to her family's safety, citing as evidence the fact that she had a public Facebook page with a photo of her kids. The paper did note that the police had tested Maria's DNA and it didn't match.

None of the theories made much logical sense. The Broadduses had answers to every question. "How does someone go from a \$300,000 house to a \$1.3 million house in ten years?" Derek told me. "It's America!" But they weren't speaking publicly, and the rumors persisted. One Boulevard resident wrote a letter to the editor arguing that "an elaborate scheme is underway to defraud the Woods family for millions of dollars." Chambliss told me some Westfield cops even bought into the theory. There were even more skeptics online. "I live in a neighboring town. If these letters have been happening for a while, there is NO DOUBT in my mind that it would have been made public

way before this,” LordFlufferNutter said on Reddit. “This screams scam.”

The Broadduses hadn’t known how their neighbors would react to news about The Watcher, but they had lived in the area for a decade, and Maria’s family had been a part of the community for much longer, so it was shocking to find themselves accused of being con artists. To Derek, it seemed that some in Westfield preferred the conspiracy theory to considering whether their town might be home to a menace. “There’s a natural tendency to say, ‘I’ve lived here for 35 years; nothing’s happened to me.’” Derek said. “What happened to my family is an affront to their contention that they’re safe, that there’s no such thing as mental illness in their community. People don’t want to believe this could happen in Westfield.”

While Maria looks back fondly on her childhood, she was born a few years after Westfield resident John List infamously murdered his wife, mother, and three children in their home, and remembers a period when she and other kids were warned to look out for a strange van driving around town. “My mother always told me don’t have a false sense of security,” she said. “It wasn’t that bad things were going on all the time, it was that bad things happen *everywhere*. She didn’t want me to think that this is Mayberry.”

Many locals I spoke to did seem more concerned that the national press might ruin Westfield’s good name. Some were primarily worried about arson, or vandalism, or whether the Broadduses would maintain the lawn. (They did.) Mark LoGrippe, the neighborhood’s representative on the Westfield town council, told me the primary concern he heard from residents was that they “were worried about their property value and the stigma of the neighborhood.”

The Broadduses were suddenly outcasts not only from their home but also their town. Derek wanted to leave Westfield, but Maria insisted

on not uprooting her kids. “This person took so much from us,” Maria told me. “I wouldn’t let them take more.” Two years after The Watcher’s letters arrived, the Broadduses borrowed money from family members to buy a second home in Westfield, using an LLC to keep the location private. But staying in town was stressful. The first time Maria let her daughter go to the pool with friends, she stared at the tracker on her daughter’s iPhone the whole time. One of their kids was in language-arts class when the teacher led a debate about whether the family in a book they were reading should move to Westfield. The class thought they should, in part because of how safe it was. Afterward, one of the kids told the Broadduses’ child, “My parents told me that no matter what your family says, Westfield is safe.”

Meanwhile, the Broadduses still had to figure out what to do with 657 Boulevard. Their lawsuit was pending but seemed unlikely to succeed. Some states require sellers to disclose “transient social conditions” like murders or possible hauntings — in a 1991 case involving an allegedly ghost-filled house, a New York court ruled that “as a matter of law, the house is haunted” — but New Jersey had no such regulation. (A judge later dismissed the lawsuit; the Woodses, through their attorney, declined to comment for this story.) Derek looked into renting the house to the Department of Veterans Affairs and a company that runs halfway homes.

In the spring of 2016, they put 657 back on the market, hoping it might garner more interest given how many people had reacted to the letters by saying they would have ignored them and just moved in. The Broadduses held a well-attended open house, after which Derek and Maria spent hours researching every person who signed in and comparing their handwriting to The Watcher’s, but each time a potential buyer expressed interest and met with the Broadduses’ lawyer to read the letters, they backed out. “Some cocky guy from Staten Island said, ‘Fuck it, I’m gonna get a house at a

discount,' ” Derek recalled. “He reads the letters and we never hear from him again.”

Feeling as if they were out of options, the Broadduses’ real-estate lawyer proposed an idea: Sell the house to a developer, who could tear it down and split the property into two sellable homes. They thought they could get \$1 million for the lot. Subdivisions like this had become common in Westfield, much to the chagrin of many locals, and 657 was one of the neighborhood’s largest lots. Even so, dividing it would require the Westfield Planning Board to grant an exception: The two smaller lots would be 67.4 and 67.6 feet wide — just shy of the mandated 70 feet.

When the proposal was publicly announced, Westfield’s Facebook groups lit up. Some expressed sympathy for the Broadduses, while others pointed out real estate is always a gamble. Another faction was convinced this was the culmination of a long con. “Out of this whole scam-artist story there ends up being nothing more disturbing than this move,” a local woman said. A man who coached the Broadduses’ son in football wrote, “They were in over their head from day one.” The application was jarring for the neighbors, who had learned about The Watcher from a lawsuit, and had always found it strange that the Broadduses didn’t share more information, not seeming to understand they were following orders from the police and trying to protect their kids. A typical Facebook conversation went like this one:

“Sounds like this whole ‘Watcher’ thing was a ploy.”

“The owners are good people. Not a ploy.”

“Okay. I know nothing about them.”

Kristin Kemp, a friend of the Broadduses, had tried to defend them on one Facebook forum, but people started attacking her. “Somebody asked, ‘How do we know it’s not you writing the letters?’ ” Kemp told me.

When the planning board met to decide the application in January 2017, it had already devoted a three-hour hearing to the issue. More than 100 residents showed up. One of them, who lived across the street and had a daughter in the same grade as one of the Broadduses’ kids, had retained a lawyer to fight the proposal. (Here was a new suspect: Who but The Watcher would go so far as to hire an attorney to preserve the house?) After a quick discussion about a Wells Fargo branch that wanted to use brighter lightbulbs than the town allowed, the room grew as tense as suburban-planning-board meetings get. James Foerst, the Broadduses’ attorney, explained that the three-foot exemption was as narrow as the easel he was using to display a map of the neighborhood — a map that showed several lots on the block that were also too small. The neighbors expressed concern that the plan might require knocking down trees and that the new homes would have aesthetically unpleasing front-facing garages. Foerst repeatedly threatened the halfway house as a possible alternative.

After the lawyers, a parade of neighbors stood to speak. Glen Dumont, from across the street, said the proposal “would spell the end of the 600 block of Boulevard as we know it.” A woman whose kids had been to the Broadduses’ old home for a birthday party spoke on behalf of nine neighbors and presented 657 Boulevard as Westfield’s Alamo. “Our neighborhoods are constantly under attack from turf, lights, parking decks, you name it,” she said. “If we can’t make a stand on Boulevard, where can we?” At one point, Abby Langford stood up to say she had “spent almost 60 years looking at a magnificent, beautiful house” and didn’t “want to be looking out at a driveway.”

The hearing lasted four hours, during which there was little discussion of the reason the Broadduses had been driven to tear down their dream home in the first place. “Has anybody thought about whether or not this lunatic who did this has been apprehended?” said Tom

Higgins, who lived across the street, toward the end of the hearing. Even so, Higgins pointed out that there was no guarantee The Watcher wouldn't send letters to the two new houses and argued that aesthetics should rule the day. "Putting up two houses there is gonna stick out like an old client of mine in Texas told me," Higgins said. "It's gonna stick out like a dog's balls." While some of the neighbors expressed compassion, their focus remained on what the Broadduses stood to gain financially — and what they themselves might lose.

At 11:30 p.m., the board unanimously rejected the proposal. (A New Jersey judge later denied the Broadduses' appeal of the decision.) Derek and Maria were distraught. Even if the plan had gone through, it would have only stanching their financial bleeding. On top of the mortgage and renovations, they have paid around \$100,000 in Westfield property taxes — the town denied their request for relief — and spent at least that amount investigating The Watcher and exploring ways to deal with the home, not to mention cleaning the gutters. The Broadduses recognized that 657 Boulevard was a beautiful house on a beautiful street that was worth maintaining but were surprised their neighbors didn't see the uniqueness of the situation. "This is my town," Maria told me recently. "I grew up here. I came back, I chose to raise my kids here. You know what we've been through. You had the ability, two and a half years into a nightmare, to make it a little better. And you have decided that this house is more important than we are. That's really how it felt." (On top of all that, her dad had recently died unexpectedly.) Father Michael Saporito, the priest who blessed the house, went to one of the planning-board meetings and told me he was taken aback by how many people had come up to him and said they thought the whole thing was a hoax. "I think the human element of the story was kind of lost on the neighbors," Saporito said. The Watcher had expressed a desire to protect the Boulevard from change, but instead it had been torn apart.

Not long after the planning board's decision, the Broadduses got some good news. A family with grown children and two big dogs had agreed to rent 657 Boulevard. The renter told the *Star-Ledger* he wasn't worried about The Watcher, though he had a clause in the lease that let him out in case of another letter.

Two weeks later, Derek went to 657 to deal with squirrels that had taken up residence in the roof. The renter handed him an envelope that had just arrived:

*Violent winds and bitter cold
To the vile and spiteful Derek and his wench of
a wife Maria,*

This letter, two and a half years after The Watcher appeared, came out of nowhere. It was dated February 13, the day the Broadduses gave depositions in their lawsuit against the Woodses. "You wonder who The Watcher is? Turn around idiots," the letter read. "Maybe you even spoke to me, one of the so called neighbors who has no idea who The Watcher could be. Or maybe you do know and are too scared to tell anyone. Good move." The letter was less stylish and more wrathful than the others, and it seemed the writer had been closely following the story. They had seen the media coverage ("I walked by the news trucks when they took over my neighborhood and mocked me"), Derek's surreptitious investigatory efforts ("I watched as you watched from the dark house in an attempt to find me ... Telescopes and binoculars are wonderful inventions"), and the attempt to tear down the house. "657 Boulevard survived your attempted assault and stood strong with its army of supporters barricading its gates," the letter read. "My soldiers of the Boulevard followed my orders to a T. They carried out their mission and saved the soul of 657 Boulevard with my orders. All hail The Watcher!!!" The renter was mentioned — he was spooked but agreed to stay if the Broadduses installed cameras around the house

— and the letter indicated revenge could come in many forms:

Maybe a car accident. Maybe a fire. Maybe something as simple as a mild illness that never seems to go away but makes you fell sick day after day after day after day after day. Maybe the mysterious death of a pet. Loved ones suddenly die. Planes and cars and bicycles crash. Bones break.

“It was like we were back at the beginning,” said Maria. But it also meant fresh evidence that might help invigorate the investigation. Derek took the letter to police headquarters, where a detective looked at a neighborhood map and traced a circle around the house 300 yards in diameter, suggesting The Watcher must be somewhere in there. Derek drew one much closer. “In my view, it’s one of ten houses in the world,” he said.

The Broadduses continued to press the case, but there still wasn’t much for law enforcement to go on, and it was possible to look up and down the street and see The Watcher in practically anyone. Residents mentioned to me a teenager whose father had grown up around the corner, and a man who sometimes walked around the neighborhood playing a flute. An elderly couple behind the house had been there 47 years. The husband was the man Bill Woodward had seen sitting in a lawn chair looking at the Broadduses’ house. One of their kids had married a man who grew up in, of all places, 657 Boulevard. But these were bits of information that could mean everything or nothing depending on how hard you looked at them. The Broadduses sent new names to the investigators whenever they found something odd, but their greatest fear was that The Watcher could be someone they’d never suspect.

One day last spring, Derek picked me up at the Westfield train station. We drove past 657 Boulevard, which he and Maria try to avoid unless they have to pick up the tax bill. “It’s all beautiful trees and beautiful houses, but all I

feel is anxious,” Derek said. “Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night thinking, *What would my life be like if this didn’t happen?* We lost Christmas a couple times, and you don’t get that back — Christmas with a 5-year-old.”

The Broadduses no longer live in ever-present fear that The Watcher might strike at any moment, but they continue to deal with lingering effects from the letters. They have a new tenant at 657, but the rent doesn’t cover the mortgage. Their kids are occasionally teased at school. And the conspiratorial rumors persist. They try to avoid the people who spoke out against their planning-board application or accused them of being con artists, but suburban life makes that impossible. “I see these people on the soccer field, at the train station, and my heart starts going like it did when I played hockey and was about to get in a fight,” Derek said. When Maria found herself in a spin class at the YMCA with the head of the planning board, she went up afterward and told him, “You continue to hurt my family every day.” Earlier this year, the planning board approved splitting a lot around the corner that required an even larger exception than the Broadduses’.

Most people in Westfield told me they rarely thought of The Watcher anymore. The real-estate market was doing fine, for one, and many were surprised to find out the Broadduses were still dealing with the problem. Hindsight made Derek and Maria wonder if they should have sold the house at a loss, early on, and 657 Boulevard conjured too much emotional pain for them to ever consider moving in. They hope that a few years of renting the place without incident will help them sell it. The prosecutor’s office was continuing its investigation, but the Broadduses knew it was unlikely The Watcher would ever be caught and that the legal punishment would likely be minimal.

The Watcher was also no longer the only person sending anonymous letters in Westfield. Last Christmas Eve, several families received

an envelope in their mailboxes. They'd been delivered by hand to the homes of people who had been the most vocal in criticizing the Broadduses online. One of them, who lived a few blocks down on Boulevard, had written on Facebook: "I wish we could go back to the days of tar and feathers. I have just the couple in mind!" Another family who got the letter told me it was "weirdly poetic," as The Watcher's had been, and that it accused the families of speculating inaccurately about the Broadduses. It included several stories about recent acts of domestic terrorism in which signs of brewing mental illness had gone unnoticed. The typed letters were signed, "Friends of the Broaddus Family."

The letter writer had clearly been infected not only with The Watcher's penchant for anonymous notes but also a simmering resentment: one that had snaked its way through Westfield, making enemies of neighbors. The people who received the letters didn't know who sent them, but the tone had a familiar ring to me. When I asked Derek Broaddus whether he had written them, he paused for a moment, then admitted he had. He wasn't proud of it—he hadn't even told his wife—and said they were the only anonymous letters he'd written. But he had felt driven to his wit's end, fed up with watching silently as people threw accusations at his family based on practically nothing. (One of the people who received the letter told me they had never met the Broadduses and had no interest in doing so.) The Watcher had been obsessed with 657 Boulevard, and Derek, in turn, had become obsessed with The Watcher and everything the letters had set in motion. "It's like cancer," he told me. "We think about it everyday."

Sitting at the Westfield train station, Derek handed me his phone so I could read the fourth letter. "You are despised by the house," it read. "And The Watcher won."