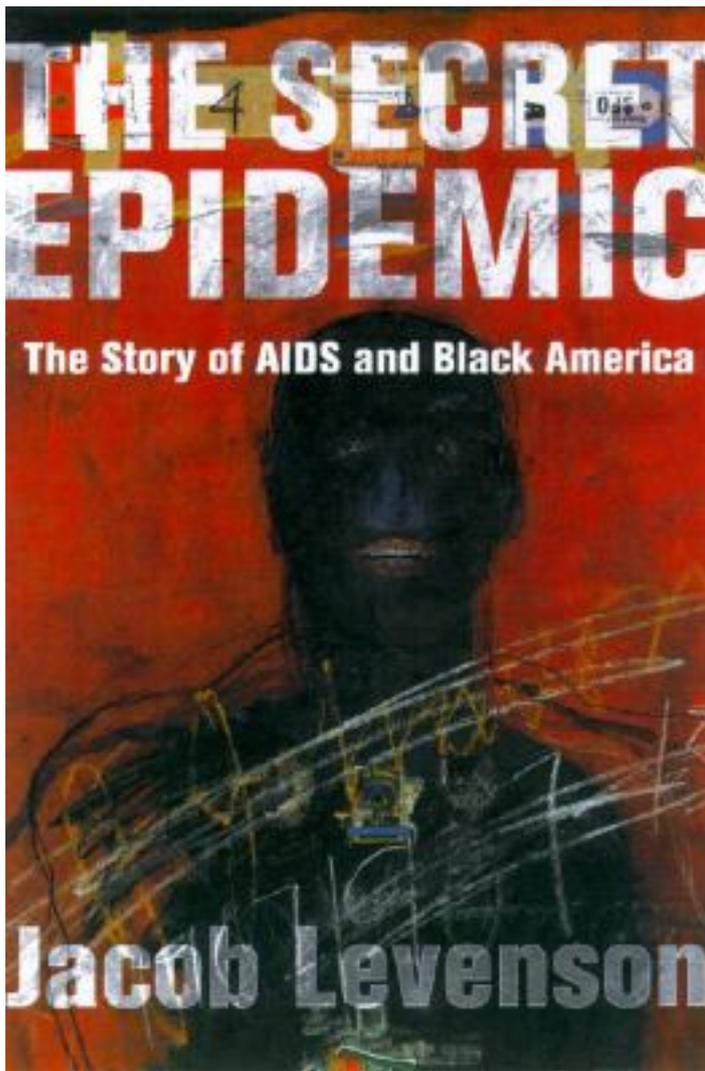


# The Secret Epidemic



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PROLOGUE  
Tornado Road  
1996  
ARA JACKSON EASED HER husband Jack's dirt-brown Buick Oldsmobile down Tornado Road which stretched out before her like a reticulated clay river rippling with thick waves of tire tracks and dipped with shallow pools from the footprints of her cousins' aunts' and uncles' who had lived here for about as long as anyone could remember. Tall pine trees leaned in over the car flickering Alabama sunshine through her dusty windshield. The forest soon gave way to a clearing. On the left was a rustic barbed-wire fence strung across an expanse of grass. Sara rolled the Buick's steering wheel to the right and pulled up in front of her parents' trailer. It was the summer of 1996. She was only sixteen and was entering the eleventh grade but she and Jack had just married and already moved into their own house a hundred yards farther down the road. They called it the yellow house. Maybe once it had suggested such a bucolic sentiment but the southern heat and rain had stripped the paint and warped the wallboards and window frames so that from the outside it had the dreamy look of a reflection off the waters of a still pond. Sara couldn't quite articulate why she liked it better here than in the city. Her parents had recently moved her and her younger sister Rebecca back to Choctaw County after they had spent most of their childhood in Mobile. There was less crackpot violence and gang activity in the country. But the river's oncoming orion's belt of fireflies oiled the air.

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