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Unnecessary Risks

Downy snowflakes floated in the dark outside his third-floor window. They seemed to neither fall nor rise, only to whirl slowly in suspension, lit from below by the faintly bluish arc-lamps in the ice-bound parking lot. Ben had sat watching them a long while, trying to clear his head . . . thinking he might save this damned doctoral thesis if only he could get away with a Jungian approach to the data, if only he hadn't studied with Austin Pierce in the first place . . . before falling asleep on his folded arms. Now he was listening to his dead father's voice. It reached him as it had so often at bedtime, gravelly and lucid and gentle: *Abou Ben Adhem, may his tribe increase* . . .

Wham! The office door shook. Ben bolted from his chair and stalled, heart thudding, beside the wheezing radiator. His right hand, which always trembled slightly, was clenched so hard that it quaked as if seized by palsy. WHAM! The door shook again and Ben croaked out, "Who's there?"

After a pause came a stage-whispered answer. "It's your own dear Dennis."

Ben cursed under his breath. He'd successfully avoided seeing his brother for weeks. Even after their mother had phoned him with the news of Dennis's promotion Ben hadn't called to congratulate him. (What did he need with congratulations? According to their mother, he'd bought himself a new used Chrysler Imperial to celebrate.) Now he was here: 250 pounds of probable anger, probably drunk. Ben eyed the door. It didn't look sturdy enough to survive another blow.

"Bennn-ny," Dennis called the way he used to when they were kids playing hide and seek.

Better stand up to him, Ben thought. He eats up that macho crap.

"Little *bro*-ther," Dennis coaxed. "Let me come in . . . or I'll huff and I'll —"

Ben yanked the door open, but before he could speak Dennis bulled forward, waving a sheaf of papers and touching a sausage-sized forefinger to his fleshy lips. Ben backed away, as he always did. Dennis was six feet tall, florid and bulky, hands thick as Porterhouse steaks. He wore his usual shabby tweed jacket and polyester slacks, browns and grays, with a wool overcoat. His breath hit Ben like a gloved punch in the face.

"What the hell've you been eating?" Ben snapped, replacing courage with gruffness as he'd always done with Dennis. "I'm used to stale Jack Daniels, but —"

Dennis grabbed him by the neck and leaned down close. "Johnny Walker," he belched, "red label. An' a bit of smoked herring."

"Jesus."

Dennis grinned. "Not so. But I commandeth thee to sit anyway!"

"Look, I'm really busy here."

"No, no, no . . . you don't get it, li'l brother. This is business. Oh-ficial."

Ben glared. “You want Doctor Wright. He’s Chief Brainard’s favorite source on ‘the mental angle.’”

“*Fuck* Roy Brainard,” Dennis said flatly. He shoved the papers into his brother’s face with his free hand. “This is confidential shit, Ben. Wright sucks to many mucky-muck cocks in this town.”

Ben twisted out of Dennis’s grip. “You mean there’s a risk.”

“Nah,” Dennis said. “No risk, li’l brother. I’ll take the risk. I just need . . . hell, I don’t even *know* what I need.” The papers rustled in his fist. “This is something old Wright wouldn’t know what to do with. I need *you*, Ben.”

He slammed the papers down on the desk, fished around inside his overcoat, and pulled out a pint-sized silver flask. Then he uncapped it, tipped it up and sucked at the mouth like a starving baby. Ben leaned against the cold window, massaging his sore neck furiously. Dennis lowered the flask and drew one hand across his mouth, then shot Ben a sheepish look. “I’m sorry, kid.” He reached toward Ben tenderly, but his brother pulled back. Dennis nodded. “Really sorry,” he said. “But I’m okay now.” He eased his heavy thigh onto the desk.

No escape, Ben thought. Yet he didn’t feel resentful. In fact, the anger suddenly drained from his body as he eyed the name on a page his brother was now half-sitting on: Richard Hellman. A smile rose to his lips. He watched Dennis take another long pull at his flask. “Let me get you a chair,” Ben said. “Dennis, don’t move. I’ll be right back.”

“Yeah,” Dennis answered and turned his bleary gaze toward the dark window.

Ben hurried down the hall, looking for another open office and thinking of Richard Hellman. For as long as Ben could remember Hellman had been known as an eccentric, a recluse, whose legendary forays into stocks and strategic metals had made him a multi-millionaire by the age of thirty. He publicly

ascribed his success to “the Sight,” and in fact had been briefly famous as a child for helping a fresh-faced detective named Roy Brainard locate the body of a boy whose babysitter had dismembered him and hidden the pieces in a hollow tree. So it had come as a shock when Hellman responded to a classified ad placed by Ben and Austin Pierce, seeking volunteers to help in researching ESP. The professor and his student had assumed he was bored, a rich guy out for a lark; or worse, that he might have been planning a hoax of some kind. The second possibility didn’t worry Austin, who was the faculty’s only Jungian — an iconoclast, a maverick. “We’ve got a well-designed experiment,” he’d told Ben. “Nobody’ll end-run it.” Ben hadn’t been so sure, especially after watching the cards marked with squares, circles, triangles and stars turn under the eyes of the student volunteer while Hellman, blindfolded in another room, named each new shape unerringly. He’d outperformed every other test subject — to the delight of Dr. Pierce, who after all didn’t have a Ph.D. riding on the results. Ben did — and what was worse, his thesis advisor was Hans Wright, an almost fanatical behaviorist who had told Ben that Jungian psychology was “marginal science, at best.” The remark had made Ben wonder if Wright had approved his thesis topic for the sole purpose of holding Pierce up to ridicule, maybe even to get him fired from the staff. It all came down to politics: Ben had asked Dr. Wright to be his advisor because his name carried more weight in the academic community than Dr. Pierce’s did. So here he was, laboring over a thesis that might be thrown out at the eleventh hour as “unscientific.” But Dennis may unwittingly have given him a second chance. If his problem involved Hellman and Ben contributed to solving it, there would be a public acknowledgement . . . and Wright would have no choice but to approve his thesis. For once in his life, Ben thought, my boorish brother might actually be of use.

When he finally returned with a chair from Dr. Pierce’s office, Ben found Dennis cocked back in his ergonomic desk chair, wet feet propped on a stack of computer printouts of raw data from the ESP

experiments. He cracked the chair down, lifted Dennis's feet up roughly and dropped them onto the floor.

"Hey, li'l brother! Assaulting an officer —"

"This is my *work*, okay?" Ben snapped. "My space."

Dennis made a fly-shooing motion. "Sure-sure-sure."

"Listen," Ben said, "I don't *have* to help you." As the words flew from his mouth he thought, Don't blow it.

Dennis grabbed him by the shirtfront. "*You* listen, li'l brother. When I said this is business, I meant it. *Police* business."

Perfect, Ben thought . . . but as he thought it, he stared into Dennis's face and suddenly could feel, across the years, the snowball his brother had packed into a fist-sized ball of ice whizzing down out of the January sky, straight down into his face, a brain-jarring, jagged rock packed inside . . . and the old rage reddened his face. He touched his brother's wrist, making sure he could see how violently his hand was shaking. Dennis blushed and turned him loose.

"Come on," Dennis whispered.

Ben took a deep breath through gritted teeth and nodded.

Dennis sat down on the chair Ben brought him, then leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. "You know Richard Hellman," Dennis said. It was a statement, not a question.

Ben nodded, stifling a smile. He had something Dennis needed. "*Know* is a strong word."

"Meaning?"

"How do we *know* anybody?"

"Fine. You *studied* him."

“He was a volunteer.”

Dennis’s upper lip curled back. “You studied him.”

“All right, we studied him. So what?”

“He’s dead.”

Ben felt a string of dry air knot in his throat. He tried to swallow it, then sat down heavily in the chair he’d brought for his brother. The crackle of the cheap vinyl made his skin crawl, somehow.

Hellman dead. Poor bastard. Then his thoughts swarmed back to his damned thesis. Hellman dead! He could almost hear Dr. Wright’s voice: *Terrible thing. Awful. But of course you can’t go forward now.*

“Shit,” Ben breathed at last. “When?”

“A few days back. It’ll be a week tomorrow.”

Ben looked up at Dennis—his brother, the detective. “Was he murdered?”

“Yes and no, li’l brother.”

“Meaning?”

“I mean there’s a killer,” Dennis said. “But the M.E.’s calling it suicide.”

Ben was getting impatient. “You know I never liked mysteries.”

“Yeah,” Dennis said with a nasty laugh. “Mister *War and Peace*.”

“*Crime and Punishment*,” Ben snapped. “Try it sometime. You might find it useful in your line of work.”

“I’m up to here with crime. As for punishment . . . that’s why I’ve come to you, li’l brother.”

“So you want my help finding —”

“Oh, we found him.”

“The killer?” Ben said, and Dennis nodded. “Then what do you want from me?”

Dennis sighed, his whiskey-clouded gaze wandering toward the poster of B. F. Skinner on the wall over Ben's shoulder. "They won't let me at him. Brainard claims we don't have a case."

For some reason, the look on Dennis's face made Ben remember the summer he'd spent mowing lawns: the way a truckload of grass clippings, by day's end, would be warm and dry on top but hot underneath — hot and damp, with a nauseating stench. "You *don't*, do you," Ben said. "Have a case."

"No," Dennis admitted. "But there's more at stake than a fucking case. Y'see, we're not talking small potatoes. We got a killer who wants to be Mayor."

Ben didn't follow politics, especially local politics. But who could have missed the hoopla surrounding the resignation of Mayor Jake Fensterwald? "Big J," as he was known, was bowing out after 20 years plus in office. Rumor had it Big J's decision had something to do with a threesome his wife had caught him indulging in between rounds of a charity golf tournament, but officially Big J was simply returning to the private sector after two decades of faithful public service. Ben had seen several below-the-fold headlines about the suspense surrounding Big J and the question of who he would pick as heir to the throne. There was quite a crowd of party hopefuls, Ben knew, but the buzz was that the fix — as the papers up at the Capitol liked to put it — was in.

"He's a friend of Big Jake Fensterwald," Ben said.

Dennis grinned. "You *are* more than just a pretty face."

Ben glanced out the window. Off in the night, someone stuck on the ice was rocking his car back and forth to free it. Ben could hear the heavy scream of studded tires spinning. "So," he said at last, "you're going to do your civic duty."

Dennis laughed. "Yeah. Sure." He fell silent a moment. "Listen. You know enough about Hellman — enough about people — to tell me if I'm right. If Hellman killed himself because of Sadler."

“*Sadler?* As in Sadler’s Department Store? Sadler Hall?”

“Sadler Boulevard,” Dennis added. “*That* Sadler, yeah.”

“Dennis,” Ben said, “we’re *sitting* in Sadler Hall.” When his brother shrugged, Ben laughed. “No risk!”

Dennis leaned his head back and shut his eyes. “Humor me, li’l brother. Read Sadler’s statement.”

Ben glanced down at Dennis’s sheaf of papers. He’d laid them on the stack of computer printouts — the ones his wet feet had water-stained — that contained the raw data from the Hellman experiments. What if Dr. Wright used Hellman’s death as an excuse to throw it all out? Then Ben had better take this opportunity to gain some leverage. If he could help the police, Dr. Wright would find it difficult to reject his work. On the other hand, would Ben be stepping on Dr. Wright’s toes by getting involved?

“I need to think,” Ben said.

Dennis waved a hand without opening his eyes. “Think on, Gunga Din. I have all night.”

Ben meant to start a mental pros and cons list, his usual approach to making tough decisions, but instead he found himself remembering the day Hellman first walked into the lab. He was tall, well over six feet, bony but graceful, looking slightly anemic (his skin was foxed like a page from an old book). His eyes were large and radiant, like fake eyes rented from some prop department for psychics. He seemed shy, but whenever the cold edge of scientific doubt shone through Ben’s questions (Dr. Pierce had charged him with interviewing prospective subjects), a similar blade glinted in Hellman’s voice — glinted and parried: he favored irony over confrontation. Yet, when Ben made some condescending remark about another subject whose scores were abysmally low, Hellman had given him a penetrating

look and murmured, “You’re an unforgiving man, Mister Rowse. A disagreeable trait in anyone, but especially so in a man who studies people.”

Ben’s face burned as he remembered how the word “lunatic” had flashed through his mind, how just at that moment Hellman had shot him an eerie grin.

“I assure you, Mister Rowse, I’m no lunatic. If these experiments reveal any self-delusions, they’ll be yours.”

As it turned out Hellman did prove himself. He performed with 90% accuracy in test after test, and Ben’s reaction was a self-disgusting blend of euphoria and fear.

“It’s like walking by the Grand Canyon,” he’d confided to Dr. Pierce one night. They’d spent several hours reviewing the astonishing data on Hellman. “You suddenly look down, and you’ve stepped right off the cliff. Right off!”

“I *like* walking on air,” Dr. Pierce had laughed. “Christ, if I thought the world was nothing but atoms, little wheels within wheels . . . I’d be a mechanic, not a psychologist.”

Ben was no wheels-within-wheels man, so he stuck with the work, stuck with Hellman. By the end he’d developed something like fondness for the man, so that he’d experienced just a twinge of professional objection when Hellman invited him and Dr. Pierce to his house for dinner the weekend after the experiments were finished. To celebrate, Hellman had said.

“You *are* allowed to celebrate, aren’t you?”

“Of course we are!” Dr. Pierce had laughed, and Ben had followed his lead.

Hellman’s house was still vivid in his mind, a literally eccentric tower of wood and glass, crowned by a huge skylight — three stories, every room giving onto the central shaft that was open from ground floor to roof. During the obligatory tour, Hellman had pressed a button that made the skylight

split like a clam shell; the halves slid back into the ceiling, and a rush of cool night air poured down.

“On a good night,” Hellman told them, “there are more stars than anyone can count. It’s like an eye wide open on heaven.” He’d cooked the dinner himself — lamb and saffron rice, baby broccoli in béarnaise sauce, rosemary and black olive peasant bread — and he started it off with a toast. “To my favorite left-brainers,” he’d said with a grin, lifting a glass of buttery Chardonnay.

Suddenly, for the first time since Dennis had given him the news, Ben felt a wave of genuine sorrow swelling inside him. Hellman had given him the first faint glimmerings of a career. More than that, he’d attempted friendship. And now he was gone.

Ben glanced at his brother, whose eyes were open now and frankly fixed on him. “Tell me first,” Ben said. “How did he . . . you know.”

Dennis nodded solemnly. “You were over to Hellman’s house at least once. According to Doctor Pierce.”

Ben was a little alarmed that his name had come up in the investigation of a suicide. Worse, Dr. Pierce had never mentioned being talked to (he’d probably been warned to keep it to himself); worst of all, his own brother had kept it under his hat. Hellman had been dead almost a week. “I was there just once,” Ben said evenly. “Weeks ago.”

“October twenty-fifth.”

Ben shrugged. “Okay.”

Dennis raised his flask and eyed it, shaking his head. “He hanged himself, li’l brother. Remember that skylight?”

An eye open on heaven, Ben thought. “Yeah.”

“He cranked it shut on the knotted end of the rope. Then he put the noose on and slipped over the railing outside his bedroom.”

Ben’s stomach tightened. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

“A God damned third-floor bedroom,” Dennis said. “Lucky it didn’t take his head off.” He uncapped the flask and took a long pull at the mouth of it, then looked away.

Ben held out his hand. “Give me that.”

Dennis laughed and handed him the bottle. “Not too much now,” he cautioned. “I need your head clear.”

“Yeah. Sure,” Ben said. Then the brown fire was lashing down his throat, and he closed his eyes on tears.

*

“I hoped it would never get this far. But your Sergeant Rowse is a bulldog. He sniffed me out, Roy. I admit it — I planned to hide all this. I thought, at the worst, I’d have to cook up a story. But seeing as how the truth’s so bizarre, seeing how my campaign’s about to be announced . . . well, better not to hide anything. Trust me, there’s nothing worth making public anyway. So I’ll tell it. The whole truth and all that bullshit. Then maybe you can manage to strap a muzzle on your mutt. It’s pretty clear he dislikes me. Who knows what he’d do with this stuff? But I trust your judgement, Roy. You’re Chief of Police, and you wouldn’t keep anybody around who wasn’t loyal, would you? I hope not. I wouldn’t feel comfortable as Mayor if I had to worry about loyalty.”

Ben looked up from the page and gazed at Dennis, who'd turned his chair toward the snowy night window. It was the chair from Dr. Pierce's office, which gave Ben a sense of childish satisfaction, and Dennis sat slumped between its chrome and synthetic wood arms, his big feet propped on the window sill. Sadler's right to worry, Ben thought. He'd called Dennis a mutt — Brainard's mutt at that — and Dennis had never learned to shrug off insults. He was certainly pissed off that Brainard had personally taken Sadler's statement, and in Sadler's own home. "He got away with no hard questions, li'l brother," Dennis had said. Then he'd added with a sneer, "'Tell me what happened,' Brainard says, and records his buddy runnin' off at the mouth for an hour. Sadler got a free ride." That wasn't all of it, though. Moral outrage had never been Dennis's style.

There was something more to Sadler's motives, too — that much was obvious from the first paragraph of his statement. Ben could only guess what it might be. But as he read on, he could feel the undertone of vexation deepen by small degrees toward something near hysteria.

Sadler, as it turned out, had known Hellman years before, when Hellman had gone to school with Sadler's son Tom. In his statement he was careful to insist that Hellman had never been close to Tom. "He was no friend, Roy. Trust me. He was a follower." Ben knew the type. Hell, until Dennis had put him in the hospital with that rock wrapped up in a snowball, Ben himself had been that type. Now, especially on bad days when his damaged brain made his right hand quiver, he was a different type altogether — the bitter, disillusioned type. Dennis had never been a Tom Sadler, of course. Tom's type Ben had seen a lot of at college: witty, handsome and athletic, socially adept, not brilliant perhaps but certainly ambitious, he'd had what Hollywood called "screen presence," a built-in charisma as real and reliable as a Wall Street trust fund. Tom's type attracted types like Hellman, whom Sadler described vividly at age twelve or so. "He was sallow and spindly," Sadler told Brainard. "His hair was unruly,

oily, flaky, a sort of tawny blond. He came from nothing. His father took a powder before he was born (I had him looked into; it's what a good father does), and his mother had a weak constitution that kept her from holding a job, so she took in ironing, baked pastries and such for a local shop. They scraped by. You know, month-to-month types. No wonder this guy was attracted to Tom! But it bothered me, the way Hellman shadowed him day after day. To put it bluntly, he was effeminate. Openly queer — no; in those days nobody was. But I always worried . . . not that I had any doubts about Tom, hell no. It was just that Tom was young, and like most boys he was susceptible to . . . you know. Confusion." Ben couldn't help smiling. Despite Sadler's disgust, he hailed from that semi-mythical "kinder and gentler" America, where sons were never viewed as sexually sick or as shills for the Dark One, but simply "confused." When Ben's father, who'd been truly kind and gentle, found out from his sister that his nephew, Ben's cousin Jerry, was living a fiercely homosexual life in San Francisco, his comment was typically circumspect: "Jerry's a disappointment to his mother." Ben couldn't help but wonder just how "confused" Tom actually was, and evidently Sadler thought Chief Brainard might be wondering the same thing. He went on quickly in his statement to say that Hellman and his son had drifted apart before high school. "I didn't know why," Sadler said, "and I didn't care." Tom stayed on track, advancing from success to success, graduated, joined the Army — a choice that surprised even Sadler and his wife. "Ruth and I always thought he'd go Navy. But he didn't want to be apart from Amy." Who was Amy? "Then came the Bay of Pigs," Sadler said (even in the transcript, the words came wrapped up in a sigh). "You remember, Roy — that whole fiasco. And later . . . the déjà vu."

Ben looked up from the page, past the chair where Dennis slumped with his round head tipped forward in a drowse. Thick snowflakes swarmed slantwise across the dark window, dizzying, almost

hypnotic. “Déjà vu,” Ben said under his breath. The phrase clearly referred to something Brainard knew so well that his friend had only to hint at it.

“You finished already?” Dennis was eyeing Ben’s reflection in the glass.

Ben shook his head. “I have a question. What’s this about déjà vu? Bay of Pigs and all that?”

“Bay of Pigs,” Dennis said, rolling his head to squeeze the stiffness out of his neck. “Long story.”

“Condense it for me.”

Dennis straightened and turned his chair half toward his brother, then took his flask from the corner of Ben’s desk and sipped at it pensively. “Goes like this,” he said at last. “Tom Sadler married a girl named Amy Warner. He’d just graduated from high school, see. She was younger. Quit school to marry him. He was planning on law school in California, at Berkeley, and she figured she’d finish out there. Anyway, some campus recruiter got to him there and he ended up in the Army. Said he wanted to work in Special Forces. Old Sadler was furious when he found out.”

“He doesn’t sound furious in his statement.”

“He’s a fucking liar.”

His brother’s vehemence took Ben by surprise. “Why would he lie?”

Dennis shot him a harsh, bleary look. “Read on.”

“Finish your story first,” Ben said.

Dennis sighed. “Like I fucking said, fucking Sadler was fucking furious.” He swallowed another mouthful of whiskey, then pressed the flask against his cheek. “Tom’s mother Charlotte got sick enough to rate a few weeks in Greenwood. You know the place.”

“The sanitarium,” Ben nodded.

“Your Doctor Wright recommended it,” Dennis said.

“He’s still on the board of directors out there.”

“Yeah, well . . . the woman hasn’t been right since.”

Ben fought back the urge to defend Doctor Wright. After all, he had his own doubts about Greenwood. “Just wind up this tale, okay?” Ben said.

“Yeah,” said Dennis thoughtfully. “This tale. Well, Tom was good at soldiering. He was strong, resourceful, just bright enough . . . you know, all the things a government likes in a man. A year or so later he got pulled into the Bay of Pigs.”

“*That* I remember. What happened?”

“He went missing in action,” Dennis said. “But nothing was clear at first. The invasion itself was hot, and the Pentagon’s energy went into trying to put out the fire. Even Sadler didn’t have strings enough to pull. There were a few tense weeks, then the Dear Spouse letter.”

“He was killed?”

“According to the Army.”

“Meaning?”

Dennis grinned archly. “A month later he turned up on Amy’s doorstep. Actually, on Sadler’s. She’d come back from California and was living in mourning with the in-laws, when the doorbell rings, and there’s dear heroic Tom. He’d spent some time in a Florida hospital, but his wounds weren’t serious.”

“So the system lost him.”

“Maybe. Maybe it was all just a clerical error.”

“But you think . . . what? Something sinister?”

Dennis shrugged. “Who knows? Bay of Pigs, secret operation . . . fucking *illegal* operation. Of course, that’s all the more reason for a clerical error.”

“Your lack of trust in your government surprises me, detective.”

“Fuck you,” Dennis said with a humorless smile.

“Fuck you, too. Go on.”

“Well, it turns out old Tom likes the cloak and dagger shit. So he re-ups and finagles himself a series of black ops in various exotic locales. Viet Nam, Panama, Afghanistan. He ended up in Chile. That’s when the second Dear Spouse letter came.”

“Missing?”

“Oh yes.”

Now Sadler’s comment made sense. “Déjà vu,” Ben said.

“And this time he wasn’t just a local boy, see. Far as the press was concerned they had a *hero* on their hands. Real life drama, li’l brother. Was the patriot lost in the jungle? Or just lost in the files again? Sold a lot of papers.” Dennis saluted Ben with the flask, then pulled another mouthful from it.

“So . . . what? Was he really missing?”

Dennis swallowed hard. The whiskey gave his eyes a sheen of vehemence. “Still is, Ben. Three years later. Still! The Army’s not talking, and Amy . . . she’s still waiting. Still . . .” Dennis waved his hand vaguely, as if he could pluck the right word out of the air.

What the hell? Ben thought. “Dennis,” he said, “do you *know* Amy Sadler?”

His brother looked away, out into the whirling snow. “Just read, damn it.”

“Listen —”

“*You* listen,” Dennis said and heaved his bulk up from the chair. Ben shrank back, which made his brother pause and stand swaying while something — perplexity, Dennis thought, or even shame — shadowed his face. Very softly, he pleaded, “Just read, okay? I gotta piss.”

Ben watched Dennis weave out into the dim corridor, listened to the scuff and clump of his drunken walk. Bastard, he thought. Ben’s bad hand was shaking. He made a fist, but the tremors intensified. I don’t need this, he thought. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to breathe evenly, deeply . . . to get control. But his head was alive with pictures. He was eight again. There were the pale green hospital walls, the painted steel bed rails. Dennis slumped in a chair near the bed, head thrown forward from his rounded shoulders. Watery early-spring light gleamed at the roots of his buzz-cut. He was big even then, Ben remembered. A ten-year-old who slouched, who lumbered — a careless kid. They’d been in the back yard, at the lower end where their father’s huge garden lay under snow. There were stacks of wire cones that in summer supported sprawling tomato vines. There were rough spindles of orange twine for laying out the rows of carrots and peppers and broccoli. There were three-foot green steel posts to hold up the chicken-wire for peas and beans to climb. A pile of scrap lumber in one corner of the yard served as Ben’s bunker, while Dennis used the tool shed in the other corner for shelter. It was war, as always. Each was armed with a rifle made of wood, and each rifle had a notch in the barrel to hold a big rubber band that would be stretched back and held in place by a glued-on clothespin. You just had to aim and press the clothespin to fire the rubber band. But the day was too cold for rubber bands — a biting, blue, wet-cold April day. So, in addition to imaginary bullets fired from wooden guns, the brothers had armed themselves with snowball grenades. The yard was wide; 50 feet of earth and chilly, sun-drenched air lay between them. When the grenades came down they exploded into slush. Half the time they came apart in mid-air, especially Ben’s because his hands were small, which meant his

grenades were small and loosely packed. He had a good arm, though. The side of Dennis's shed was dotted with the lumpy remains of Ben's grenades. They'd been playing a long time, and Ben's arm was getting tired. It was almost time for lunch, so Ben yelled to Dennis, "Truce!" He stayed crouched down behind the lumber pile, waiting for his brother to cry "Truce!" in reply. But Dennis didn't answer. That's when Ben peeked out over the boards and saw his brother packing a jagged rock into a fresh ball of wet snow. He cried "Truce!" again and could hear the alarm in his own voice. Then he heard the *whush* as Dennis lobbed the grenade toward him. They both watched it rise, reach the top of its arc, start down. It made a strange whizzing sound that grew as Ben watched. He didn't move; maybe he *couldn't* move (the grenade's descent was hypnotic). Anyhow, he couldn't remember the impact — only the flash in his head and the numb, slow-melting, nauseated sleep he woke from two days later. It was the shaking of his right hand that woke him, not the quiet sobbing of his thick-chested brother who was sitting beside the bed. Dennis, he'd said, the name catching on his sleep-sticky tongue. And suddenly his brother was up, clinging to the bed rail. Ben, listen, Dennis pleaded. Don't tell Dad about the rock. Ben said, He doesn't know? Dennis shook his head, fighting back tears. If he finds out, Ben . . . I'm dead, man! I'm grounded. And my bike, Ben . . . he'll make me wait another year. I'll have to walk to school for another whole year! The memory still filled Ben with anger — though he didn't know if it was Dennis's self-serving cowardice or his own willingness to let him off the hook that enrages him the most. Dennis got his bike, after all, and Ben got a tremor, a hand that quivered whenever he felt stressed. Brain damage . . . not, finally, serious — but permanent.

"Bastard," Ben heard himself growl through gritted teeth. Then he stared down at the papers that quivered in his trembling hand and took another deep, focusing breath. Think of the thesis, he told himself. Think of yourself for a change.

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“Tom’s second disappearance sent both of my women over the edge,” Sadler told Chief Brainard. Ruth and Amy couldn’t open a paper without being reminded. “My enemies loved it,” he complained. “Ruth ended up back in Greenwood — it’ll come up again this election, don’t you worry. But Amy . . . she went a different way.” By that he meant that Amy Sadler clung to a belief that grew increasingly untenable as time went on: the conviction that Tom was still alive somewhere. Sadler knew that the Army’s first mistake was unrepeatable luck. When Ruth was released from Greenwood, she returned to a bitterly divided house. Her husband quietly but continually urged her to forget, while her daughter-in-law talked as if Tom would turn up on the porch again at any moment. It wasn’t long before the two women were so joined in their hope that they began seeing Sadler himself as a threat. “She turned Ruth against me,” he said. “Months went by during which she was no wife to me, Roy — and I started casting around for a way to shake her faith in Amy’s fantasy. Then one day Amy brought up Richard Hellman.”

Amy Sadler had been two grades behind Tom in high school, so she’d known Hellman only slightly. By then the two boys didn’t associate. Hellman, in fact, was seen as a freak — an oddball, a queer, with his rumpled corduroys long out of style and his oily clairvoyance (he was rumored to have seen Martin Luther King assassinated in a dream the night before the event). But when the paper ran a story on Hellman one day, about the alleged “killings” he was making in commodities thanks to “the Sight,” she got the notion to call him, prevail on their long-ago acquaintance, and ask for his help. She did it in secret, and Hellman agreed to see what he could do.

“Hellman,” Sadler said. “That charlatan. I don’t know what he told Amy, exactly — when I finally confronted him he wouldn’t say. He had other things on his mind. Whatever it was, it lit her up like one of those Pentecostals. I’ll never forget that shiny-eyed conviction she had when she announced that Tom was about to be found. And Ruth — she believed it!”

Sadler had visions of his wife coming finally unhinged. But luck was with him. Hellman had offered to help, Amy told them, on one condition: he would speak only with Owen Sadler.

“You should have seen the faces they turned toward me, Roy — my women. Pleading, hopeful, mistrusting (they knew my position on Tom), they knew I was their last resort. And it hit me that this would be perfect, a real opportunity to put the whole tragedy behind us. I said I’d do it, and they were jubilant, Roy — absolutely beside themselves! That’s how deep into grief they’d gone — it never occurred to them to wonder what Hellman wanted with me. But I wondered. All kinds of things went through my head. Was he after money? (He had money.) Did he have some score to settle? (I’d always considered him a creep but never treated him badly.) None of it mattered, finally — because no matter what Hellman had to tell me, I knew I would come back with news of Tom’s death. A simple, straightforward dose of reality. Then my women could grieve and be done with it.”

Sadler called Hellman and set up a time to meet the next evening, at Hellman’s estate. He instructed Sadler to bring a few objects Tom had touched. “‘Such as?’ I asked him. I don’t suppose he missed the disgust in my voice. ‘Things from his childhood,’ Hellman told me. ‘Things that meant something to Tom. We’ll see what they have to say.’ That’s what he told me, Roy. He would see what a bunch of inanimate objects had to say.”

“Ben?”

Ben jumped at Dennis’s touch. “Jesus!” he cried, startled half-way out of his chair.

Dennis stepped back, puzzled at first. Then his face lit up with amusement. “These scary old buildings don’t agree with you, li’l brother.”

Ben stifled a wry smile of his own and sat back in his chair. “Fuck you.”

“Here.” Dennis tossed a cellophane-wrapped sandwich onto the desk. “Take a break.”

Ben laid Sadler’s statement aside and picked up the sandwich, squinting at it through the plastic. Ham and cheese — his favorite. Out the corner of his eye he watched his brother ease back into the chair by the window. Who’d have imagined Dennis would remember something like ham and cheese? “I thought this was life or death,” Ben said, peeling open the sandwich package.

Dennis bit into his own sandwich and said as he chewed, “I’m no fanatic, li’l brother. Besides,” he grinned, “the booze is wearing off.”

“Mom’ll be happy to hear you’re cutting back.”

“I’m *not* cutting back,” he said. He was more than defensive. It was a point of honor. “It just always gets to the point where it stops helping. I mean, I get sober. At least for awhile.”

“So what are we supposed to drink with these delicious sandwiches?”

“I ran out of change for the pop machine.”

Ben nodded and took another dry bite. “Pass the flask,” he said.

Dennis handed it over. “Your etiquette’s slipping.”

“I’m starved,” he said. The flask felt heavier than before. “Did you refill this?”

“The car’s right out front.”

Ben shook his head and took a long swallow. Then he handed the flask back to Dennis.

They sat eating quietly for some time, watching the snow. It was falling steadily now, slowly and almost straight down. It looked like a curtain of white beads being lightly swayed by a breeze. The

brothers ate without hurry, now and then passing the flask. Ben glanced at the clock: a few minutes past 2 a.m. Dennis finished his sandwich and tossed the wrapper into the trash. Ben did the same. The radiator (Sadler Hall was in need of renovation) clanked, chortled, ticked, and the room grew warmer. A few minutes later it wheezed and fell silent.

“Tell me about Amy,” Ben said at last.

“Shit,” Dennis said and shook his head.

“Come on.”

Dennis stared down at the floor. “This was almost a year ago,” he said. “Back when I drove a beat. Used to drive by Sadler’s place every day. Sometimes twice. I’d see her off in the distance, across that big manicured lawn, sitting on the patio, or out on the deck that wraps around the second floor. Amy Warner. You know we took English together in high school? Oh yes, li’l brother. Amy Warner. Round Irish eyes, black hair down to the shoulders. She has skin like fresh cream. I think of her and I can taste fresh cream.”

Jesus, Ben thought. The brute’s in love.

Dennis took another long pull at the flask. “One day she was down at the iron fence when I drove by. She looked up and smiled. The next time I stopped and we talked through the fence. Renewed our old acquaintance, y’might say. Got to be a habit — talking to Amy. Of course all she talked about was Tom this, Tom that. She expected him to work another miracle. And all the time I’m standing there on the wrong side of the fence.” Suddenly, Dennis looked Ben hard in the eyes. “Amy doesn’t play into this case. Understand?”

“Sure,” Ben said.

“There’s no relation.”

“No relation,” Ben echoed.

Dennis nodded, then pointed at Sadler’s statement. “Go ahead now,” he told him. “You finish.”

“Gotta check out the plumbing first,” Ben said. He stood up, a bit unsteadily, and headed for the door.

“You do that, li’l brother,” Dennis said. The words stuck together like oatmeal in his mouth.

Ben walked to the restroom across from Dr. Wright’s office. He was getting a little tight himself and it felt good to drain some of the alcohol out of his body. By the time he came back to his own office, Dennis was sleeping, so Ben sat down as quietly as he could. He picked up the statement, but found himself watching his brother. Dennis was breathing thickly — not snoring, but laboring. His beefy arms lay crossed over his belly, and Ben observed that in profile his face didn’t seem so round, so florid, but gave an impression of delicacy. It was almost a sensitive face. The kind of face that belonged to a man with potential. An intelligent man. He remembered Hellman saying something about intelligence — that it was overrated. This was the night of the “celebration,” when he so graciously feted Ben and Dr. Pierce. They were sipping sherry from small, crystal glasses after dinner. “I sympathize, believe me, with what you two are attempting,” Hellman had said. “But I fear you’re part of a doomed effort. I mean, the whole attempt to become what we claim to be already: *Homo sapiens*. My feeling is that we’re nothing but *Homo dolens* — and that’s all we’ll ever be.” Not man the wise, but sorrowful man.

Ben gazed at his brother. Poor bastard, he thought. And having thought it, knew he couldn’t say exactly whom he meant.

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A few days before the snowstorm burst over the city, the weather had been dry-cold and windy. Owen Sadler remembered having to squint against the pummeling gusts, tucking the paper sack tight under his arm as he climbed into a taxi just before nightfall. He'd given the dispatcher a false name and had the cabby pick him up a block from his home. Why this deception, he couldn't explain. "I've probably seen too many movies," he told Chief Brainard. But the overall motive for the taxi was simple: his Mercedes was too well known in the neighborhood, and if word of him paying a visit to Hellman — the half-cracked, stock-trading psychic — ever got back to his business partners, rumors would surely fly, and his own reputation for being a hard-nosed but trustworthy dealer might suffer. He'd made a rookie tactical error, of course, by providing the address to the driver in a scrawl on the back of his business card. It was the conscientious cabby whose report forced Brainard to bring his friend into this mess in the first place. "What can I say?" Sadler told him, sounding embarrassed. "I'm an amateur."

In fact, when he arrived on the porch of the towering oddity Hellman called home, he nearly turned around and walked the few miles back. A tail-eating serpent was carved in the burnished front door, and the image unnerved him. Then it hit him that this must be just the effect Hellman wanted — it gave him a certain primitive power, or at least an influence, over his visitors. Clinging to his sack, Sadler rang the bell.

Hellman answered almost immediately. He was taller than Sadler remembered, and sicklier, with eyes like pickled eggs and his complexion rancid as week-old custard. He waved Sadler in with a bird-like dip of his head. He led the older man up a flight of open stairs to the second floor, then into a living room with an antique couch and chair that faced each other — exposed dark wood, brocade padding nailed in place with dimpled brass tacks. There was a low coffee table of the same dark wood: curved legs, carved paws for feet. Faux this, faux that, was Sadler's judgment. Middle-class genteel from the

'40s Midwest. A few logs blazed in a fireplace flanked by windows of thick wavy glass. Hellman motioned Sadler toward the chair and took the couch for himself.

“Would you like a drink?” Hellman asked.

Sadler declined, then dropped his sack onto the coffee table between them. “Let’s get this over with.”

Hellman didn’t hesitate. He leaned forward, elbows sharp on his knobby knees, and clasped his large raw-boned hands. “I’ve waited a long time for this,” he said.

Sadler was taken aback. “I thought it was Amy who contacted you.”

“Oh, it was. It was. No, what I mean is, I’ve always known we’d meet, but of course just how it would happen . . . that I generally can’t tell. But I knew we’d sit down face to face someday, and that something like this would be between us.” He gestured toward the sack.

Sadler bristled. “I don’t like riddles.”

Hellman stared down at his hands. The knuckles were white. “You’re an unforgiving man, Mister Sadler. I was afraid of that.”

“I don’t like your tone.”

Hellman shrugged. “There’s a lot you don’t like. So let’s get down to business. Let’s see,” he said, fishing around inside the sack. “Let’s see what you found.” His hand lifted out a Boy Scout pocket knife — the kind with sides of brown plastic wrinkled to look like bone and a brass insignia. Hellman said he remembered it. “Tom used to play Jim Bowie with this. Now *that* takes imagination!”

Sadler felt almost sick with contempt. “He was a smart kid.”

“Smart,” Hellman nodded, clearly dubious. He laid the knife aside. “Oh! Look at this.” He drew out a baseball glove, the pocket well-oiled, the leather knotting loosened by years of use, and touched

the signature impressed across the outsized thumb. “Willie Mays,” Hellman mused. “Tom used to chew those squares of pink bubblegum and spit like an outfielder. The team, if I recall, was called The Ravens, and he had a raven stitched over the front pocket.” Hellman drew an X on his left breast to mark the spot. “Remember how handsome he looked in that uniform?”

Sadler blanched at this, but he held his tongue.

His discomfort made Hellman smile. “I went to all the games,” he said. “*All* the games.”

“I wish you’d —”

“Not that Tom ever noticed,” Hellman went on. “Not that I would ever have put myself . . . in his way.”

Sadler felt his face redden. “I don’t like your —”

“Tone?” Hellman snapped. “Mister Sadler, you don’t like *me*. You *never* liked me. Me with my limp wrist and too-soulful eyes. Me with my — what would you call them? *Phony* powers?”

Sadler instinctively withdrew. Confrontation, he pointed out to Chief Brainard, was no way to get something done — not and end up with a win-win deal.

“It’s true,” he told Hellman. “I’m a skeptic. And I’m here only because of Amy.”

“And because you have a wife who won’t *fuck* anymore.”

Sadler’s jaw dropped. “How do you —”

“A wife whose little sojourns in — what is it . . . Greenwood? Those really must end, mustn’t they. After all, you’re running for Mayor.”

“*Damn* you!” Sadler shouted. And who could blame him? He half rose from his chair, but his head was spinning, his knees wobbled like chunks of rubble remembering the earthquake. He sat back down, hard.

Hellman said, “Now that we understand each other.” He laid the baseball glove aside and reached into the sack. The next thing was a wristwatch — Tom had over-wound it once (back when you physically wound a watch) and the spring had cramped, but Tom had kept it. Who knew why? It wasn’t an expensive watch. Hellman held it lightly in his left hand and worried the crystal with his thumb, all the while looking Sadler in the eyes. “No more secrets,” he half whispered. “We’ll unburden each other, Mister Sadler. At least, I’ll unburden you.”

Regaining his composure, Sadler said, “We’ll see.”

Hellman nodded, briefly closed his eyes. Then he looked down at the watch — caressing it, almost — and went on.

“I’ve been gifted with the Sight for as long as I can remember. Sigh if you like, Mister Sadler — a fact’s a fact. You remember the first time I bailed out your friend?”

Sadler admitted it. “The babysitter. Young girl, thirteen. Killed the baby when it wouldn’t stop crying. I do remember. The little liar had the cops stumped for weeks. But you see, Roy Brainard had a sixth sense, too. As long as you didn’t distract the detectives, you were an asset. You kept the press occupied.”

Nevertheless, Hellman had led the police to the infant’s body, the pieces carefully wrapped in newspaper and rolled up under a fire-hollowed cottonwood stump. There had been other cases — the retarded boy lost at the church picnic, the fanatically religious molester of children, the teen lovers (a double suicide, it turned out), the escaped rapist with a taste for Asian girls. Hellman ticked them off one by one, and Sadler finally acknowledged that yes, maybe . . . why not?

“You have no idea what it means,” Hellman told him. “How it feels, being *open* all the time, unprotected. When I was a kid, before I learned to screen my impressions, even a squalling baby was

terrifying, punishing — the abandonment, the smallest discomfort opening into your world like a wound. I used to pass people on the street, disturbed people, their minds in torment, and the pain would wash over me like boiling water.”

“There’s a reason you’re telling me this?” Sadler said.

Hellman shot him a piercing look. “It has to do with Tom. What attracted me to him.”

Disgusting, Sadler thought.

“*You* may find it disgusting,” Hellman said, then smiled to see Sadler flinch at being suddenly exposed. “Those fearful little images you’re experiencing now — oh, Mister Sadler . . . I never touched Tom *there*.”

Sadler had shrunk back deeper into his chair. “You filthy . . .”

“Faggot? Yes, okay. But not to worry. You’re not nearly as attractive as Tom.”

“I don’t have to listen to this.”

“Go on, then.” Hellman waved the hand that held Tom’s watch. “Press on with your campaign for Mayor with that dream-ridden wife of yours in tow.”

Sadler sat forward, almost bolted from the chair — but he couldn’t bring himself to stand up. A sickly feeling was creeping over him. He stared at Hellman, then said at last, “Dream-ridden?”

Hellman returned his stare for a second or two, then looked down again at Tom’s watch. “Yes.”

“You mean —”

“He’s dead, yes. Tom’s dead.”

Sadler felt himself collapsing, dwindling like a balloon shoved into a freezer. Some part of him had believed — along with Ruth, along with Amy. “Tell me,” he stammered, “tell me how. . . .”

Hellman was silent a moment. “You need to promise me, first.”

“Promise what,” Sadler said. His voice was toneless and his mind was whirling.

Hellman said, “Promise to consider *me* in all this. Whether you trust my Sight or not, just please . . . *consider me*.”

Sadler tried to focus on Hellman’s face, which seemed to waver on the air — a trick, he guessed, of the flickering shadows the fire was casting about the room. He hated the feeling that Hellman wanted something, expected something. But “consider” was so vague a word. How could anyone not “consider”? So he agreed to consider Hellman, whatever that meant, and Hellman — hesitating, thumbing Tom’s old useless watch — proceeded with his story.

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Stories within stories, Ben thought. Wheels within wheels. He glanced at his brother, who twitched in some whiskey-soaked dream in the chair by the icy, black winter window. What was he after, this hulking brother of his? So far there was nothing criminal in Sadler’s statement. Did Dennis think he was lying? But there were so many details — none of it felt like a lie. What *did* it feel like? Ben looked back at the transcript in his lap. What he felt was a distant sort of dread. Strange that a person could feel dread for something already over, already in the past. That’s why it felt distant. And yet, he wished — intensely wished — that he didn’t have to read on. He wished he could tell Dennis to forget it, and then forget it himself.

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Hellman told Sadler, “I loved him. And no, not the way you’re thinking. You see, he wasn’t like anyone I’d ever met. He didn’t *hurt* — inside, I mean. That’s why he loved those tough-guy movies, the hard-boiled novels. Some people thought he was shallow, but that wasn’t it. He was . . . impervious, unshakeable. It was pure relief to be around him, for a person like me. Would I ever have had peace enough to learn how to control my impressions, if not for him? I doubt it. I’d have ended up at Greenwood strapped to a lithium drip.”

Sadler laughed, actually laughed — not harshly, but fondly. “Unshakeable,” he said. “That’s Tom all over.”

Hellman smiled. “I owed him so much. But I sure repaid him badly.”

“You were young,” Sadler said, surprised by his own sympathy.

“We were just boys, both of us, yes. And I was trying so hard to fit in.” Hellman paused, then asked if Sadler remembered when Saint Catherine’s school was under construction. He did — vaguely. “Twenty years ago now,” Hellman said. “I was nine, ten. A kid saturated with hero worship.”

The construction site had become a ritual meeting place for Tom and his friends. They’d gather on Saturday mornings (Sundays were off limits — the school was on the grounds of a convent, and while none of the crowd were Catholic, they were respectful . . . or superstitious), then they’d choose up sides and play whatever felt good at the moment: hide and seek, cowboys and Indians, war. Sometimes they’d bring along BB guns and target practice on cans and bottles the workmen had left behind. But summers were long in those days. By mid-July everyone had grown bored. Kids had begun drifting off to other pursuits — bowling leagues, tennis lessons, swimming, camp. The regular crowd had dwindled to a group of three: Tom, Hellman, and a younger boy named Jimmy Collins. One morning they came equipped for target practice. After an hour of the flat *pank* of BBs on pop cans, after the *chink* and

shatter of brown bottle glass had grown dull, the boys decided to play war instead. They'd done it before, using lengths of scrap wood for rifles. When the BB guns were handy, they'd used them unloaded. But this day was different. They each chose an identity: Tom was American (he was always the American), Hellman a German, Jimmy an Italian. (Jimmy, in fact, was half-Italian, half-Irish — a member of the town's Catholic minority, for whose edification the new school was being built.) Then each boy took a tube of BBs and headed for shelter with his rifle. Tom's had a sliding grip under the barrel that produced maximum air compression with just one pump. Jimmy and Hellman were armed with less powerful guns, though two or three pumps of the lever could make their shots almost as forceful and accurate as Tom's. Not that it mattered — they'd agreed to aim away. The last thing Tom needed, he'd told them, was to get one of them hurt and have their parents sue his old man. He'd said, "We've got deep pockets." But he didn't explain what that meant.

"We ended up in a basement area," Hellman told Sadler. "Bare concrete walls, a floor of sand. There were several rooms. By now the game was getting serious. Escalating . . . like they used to say about Viet Nam. What a word. Doesn't capture the mix of fear and excitement — that borderline sexual rush boys get when they flirt with pain."

Sadler stiffened. "I wouldn't know."

"Of course not," Hellman said with a sneer.

"Look," Sadler said.

Hellman raised his hand like a weary traffic cop. "You're right. Let's just say things got out of hand. At some point, America allied itself with Italy against Germany — I remember both of them, Tom and Jimmy, calling me a Nazi, calling me a Kraut. Well, I *am* a Kraut, Mister Sadler. They knew it, too. So . . . things got out of hand."

The boys fought their way through one of the unfinished buildings, and for a while Hellman lost track of the others. He was moving through the low-ceilinged half-darkness in a crouch when a BB bit into the concrete just over his head. He flattened himself against the wall — which turned out to be a narrow slab between two doorways. He peeked around to his right and saw two window-like openings four feet or so up the opposite wall. Beyond them was a crawlspace. He swung around to his left, looked through the second doorway. There was the crawlspace, but also another window on the east-facing wall, maybe twenty feet away across an unprotected stretch of sand. This one opened out onto the established grounds of St. Catherine's (a blue-green spruce tree spired up a dozen yards in the distance, and to either side of it leafy elms stood in a kind of sun-struck trance). You could climb out there, Hellman thought.

Just then, a BB whizzed past his ear — very close — and Jimmy shouted, Kraut dead ahead! Hellman swung back around to his right. Heat was creeping upward into his face, and his heart labored rapidly at the root of his throat. He took a blind shot and must have missed by a mile, because Tom laughed sharply. He's chicken! Tom yelled. Hellman heard whispers, then a volley of shots zinged by on either side. The BBs kicked up little bursts of sand in the ground he'd crossed to get here. There was no going back. He gripped the gun with his back to the wall. Knock it off, guys! he called. He could hear the slide on Tom's rifle pump down and up. Jimmy, too, vigorously worked his rifle's handle — one, two, three times: his shots would hit hard. Hellman had taken a BB shot before, but that time was in the autumn — he'd been wearing flannel and heavy denim jeans. Today he was wearing cutoffs and a tee-shirt, so his legs and arms were exposed. Just last month he'd been stung by a wasp, and now he thought that's what it would feel like when the BB bit into your bare skin. Come on! he called, struggling to calm his trembling voice. *You* come on, Kraut! Jimmy shouted and laughed. Yeah, called Tom, *we love*

taking prisoners! Hellman thought hard for a moment. I'm comin' out! he shouted. He held his rifle out into open view, then slowly followed it into the doorway.

There were three pops. One of the shots tagged the loose tail of his shirt. A second fanned his cheek. The third nailed the hand he held the gun with. Shit! Hellman cried and spun back out of sight. Got him! Tom yelled. *I did!* Jimmy shouted back. Hellman listened to them argue (playfully, with a fierce delight) and cradled his quivering hand. The BB was buried in the skin of his thumb knuckle. The blood was dark, almost black, in the underground dimness. Tears sprang into his eyes — hot jets of pain and rage . . . but it was the rage that hurt the most.

“Tom betrayed me,” Hellman told Sadler. “I loved him, *idolized* him. And what does he do? He fucks me over.”

Sadler said nothing. Why should he? They were kids. Kids were mean sometimes. Anyway, he doubted the whole story — though it would explain why Tom and Hellman went their separate ways. But ganging up on somebody — that just wasn't Tom.

Hellman gave a sharp, snorting laugh. “You think it wasn't like him,” he said. “Okay. Whatever.”

“That's it, then?” Sadler said. “You got me over here for *this?*”

“No,” Hellman said. “That's not quite 'it,' Mister Sadler.” Hellman gazed at Tom's watch, still in his right hand. Sadler could see the BB scar, a small pinkish crescent on Hellman's thumb. “I was so blinded by tears that it took me several minutes to work the BB out from under the skin. By then the whole knuckle was purple, the joint ached — my whole hand ached. My heart . . . well, you know. I wasn't thinking, that's all. I wanted to hurt him back. So I pumped as much air as I could into my rifle, took a deep breath, and stepped right out into the doorway. I took them by surprise, I guess. They didn't

shoot at me. Up in the left-hand window, Jimmy ducked out of sight. But Tom . . . he wanted to watch me. He was probably amused. I'd never been much of a shot, but this time I set the rifle real firmly into my right shoulder — the way Tom had taught me — and squinted along the barrel until one of Tom's eyes was sitting right on top of the forward sight."

Sadler was starting to seethe inside — seethe "openly," if such a thing were possible, because he could feel Hellman "reading" him . . . and he didn't care. He let his anger flow, and with it came a sense of release — like shouting into someone's face what you really think of them, after all those years of swallowing their bullshit! This little faggot had threatened his son, his lost son, his dear lost Tom, and he deserved to suffer. Sadler saw the pain in Hellman's face — it seemed the firelight had painted it there, he looked so dramatically anguished. Let him ache, Sadler's anger said. He's about to hurt our son.

"Go ahead," said Hellman, not looking up. "Hate me. Hate everything. But understand, too. When my finger started to tighten on the trigger, my so-called 'gift' gave me the scene."

It was, he said, an undeniable, immutable, light-drenched moment out of the future. There was a helicopter, a bitter shade of green, beating in silence over ten thousand blurry daubs of darkness — a jungle, and a river toiling through it like a snake in tall grass. You could see it all because the huge sliding door on the copter's side was open. They were following the river. In the distance you could see spreading water, the tarnished silver of an ocean.

"To this day," Hellman said, "I don't know where on the map it happened. The Army isn't telling, according to the papers. But you probably know, Mister Sadler. Or did Tom keep his last assignment a secret?"

Sadler was trembling. "Finish your fairy tale."

Hellman tossed Tom's watch back into the sack, and as he went on slowly put the other objects back as well.

"There were seven men. A stringy, curly-haired, coffee-colored man in khakis seemed to be in charge, but the pilot was white, blond as a Viking, and there was another white guy — sunglasses, a brown beret — leaning back against one of the helicopter's steel ribs and smoking like he was lost in thought. Three others were holding Tom down, though by now he wasn't struggling. His face . . . no," he said as Sadler turned his head away. "You listen, now. And remember what I asked you for. It's so little, for this kind of information."

Sadler *had* come for this — and whose fault was it that he didn't want it now? He looked Hellman in the eyes and nodded. Tell me, he thought. Tell it all.

Tom's face had been pulped, split open, the jaw shattered. But he was still alive. His lungs still sucked at the air, making a phlegmy, harsh whisper — like fingernails scratching sandpaper. They'd jerked his arms behind his back and slipped what looked like a broomstick under the elbows, then roped his hands together and tied them to his belt. His shirt was torn open in front. His chest was smooth and hairless where his torturers had shaved it, and blotchy with cigarette burns. They'd shackled his feet and run the chain through two cinderblocks. Who knows what they wanted? He'd either known nothing or kept what he knew to himself. Maybe there'd been other helicopters on other days, when Tom had been the man sitting back and smoking in quiet thought. There *was* a disturbing sense of completion to the scene — a feeling of *rightness*, somehow. Maybe that's what they mean by "fate." And yet it was wrenching to see. It made the air rifle feel like lead in Hellman's hands.

"I almost laid the gun down," he said. He'd replaced the last of the objects Sadler had brought him, and now he sat back on the couch and stared at the sack — or in the direction of the sack. "I almost

surrendered. Then it hit me: if I could be absolutely accurate, if I could muster the courage . . . I could take Tom's eye — put a BB right through the pupil — and he'd never get into the Army. He'd never end up in that helicopter."

They were silent a moment. Sadler could feel the muscles at the hinges of his jaw throbbing with the horror of it. "You didn't shoot," he said, teeth gritted.

"I shot," Hellman nodded, his eyes glistening. "Only I raised the barrel just an inch or so before I pulled the trigger. The BB hit him right here." He touched a quivering finger to his right eyebrow.

Tom clutched at his forehead and fell back in the crawlspace. He didn't even cry out. But Jimmy Collins saw he was hit and shouted something obscene — something Hellman didn't hear distinctly because he was absorbed in watching the helicopter move out across the open water. They flew for several minutes over the crawling whitecaps. After a while the curly-haired man glanced at the man in sunglasses, who didn't seem to move . . . but something passed between them, and the darker man gave the nod. Tom resisted, of course. But the struggle was brief (the torture had wrung him out). The men sent the cinderblocks scraping over the side, but Tom managed to cling to the door runner for a second or two with the tips of his fingers. Then one of the men — a boy, really, with acne scars and eyes like tarnished pennies — kicked him between the shoulder blades. All three watched him drop, but it was the boy who looked back at the curly-haired man and flashed him a nasty grin. The man tapped the pilot's shoulder and made a circular motion with his hand. . . .

"That's when the Sight let me go," Hellman said. "Suddenly I could hear Jimmy shouting that Tom was bleeding. He needed help getting him down from the crawlspace. So I helped him down (he stepped down on my shoulders and I lowered him to the ground). Tom never seemed to hold it against me, but the friendship was over. Everything was over."

“You stupid . . .” Sadler began, but realized — with a shock — that everything Hellman had seen in the future was now in the past. Thanks to this pathetic, spineless, simpering little faggot, everything *was* over — unredeemably over. He stared at Hellman’s hands, gripped tightly together in his misery, gaunt-looking, stained with shadows by the firelight. But he didn’t see them, his mind couldn’t take them in. All he could think was: How can I tell Ruth? How can I ever tell Amy?

In a voice like shattered glass, Hellman said, “You tell them like I told you. Just quote the spineless faggot.”

*

Ben needed a drink. His hand shook as he slipped the flask from under his sleeping brother’s folded hands, then shook even worse as he pulled the whiskey into his mouth. It tasted fiery, cleansing, the harsh vapors rolling their clarities into his brain. The snow had stopped. The window shone darkly like a slab of anthracite. He returned to the statement.

“Do I regret it?” Sadler said. “Not letting him cry on my shoulder? Not telling him: Hey, no problem, your gutlessness killed my Tom? Hell, the more I turned it over in my head, I wasn’t even sure I believed him. Fact is, the night I left his house with that pitiful sack rolled up under my arm, I changed my mind about Tom. I decided that Ruth and Amy didn’t need to know. Know *what*, after all? Maybe nothing but a sick fantasy. Let them think he’s alive, I figured. What can it hurt? But if any of this comes out there’ll be no escaping it. The papers’ll do their thing (didn’t Mitchell at the *Trib* tell you he’s got three reporters on the story already?), maybe have some kind of heyday . . . and I’ll have to hurt my girls with the details. Listen — I’m sorry he hanged himself. But shit, Roy, all *three* of our names could get

dragged through the mud. Just imagine what sordidness they could cook up! ‘The War Hero and the Queer,’ what a fucking scoop. That’s why you need to get in the way of this. Call it a suicide, pure and simple, motive unknown and unknowable. Let my family grieve in private. And let’s get this fucking election over with.”

Ben’s head was throbbing now. His stomach felt like a fist. He tossed Sadler’s statement down on the desk and rubbed his face with both hands. In the chair by the window his brother stirred, stretched, made yawning-bear noises. Steam in the ancient radiator coughed and clanked like a grizzled knight in armor.

“How ’bout it, Ben?” Dennis said at last.

Ben stood, stretched his head forward and side to side with eyes closed. He heard Dennis pluck the flask from among the papers on his desk, pop the silver cap, but he didn’t drink, not yet. What could he tell him? That Sadler seemed to him as “normal” (unfortunately) as they come? That homophobia, self-delusion, craven ambition weren’t illegal? But that wasn’t really why Dennis had come to him. He was a cop, a newly minted detective, not a babe in the woods.

Finally Ben said, “What’s your suggestion? Slip this statement to some reporter? They’ll can your ass.”

A pitiable expression moved over Dennis’s face. “It ain’t right, li’l brother.”

Ben shrugged. “I’m not in the rightness business. You’re not either, not really. We’re technicians. Neither one of us designed the machine.”

Dennis looked amazed. “You’re scared.”

A protest leaped into Ben's mouth, but he didn't let it out. Dennis was right. "I'm already on thin ice here, I admit it," he said. He gestured toward the litter on his desk. "It's a mess. A fucking quagmire. I thought your case might bail me out."

Dennis gave a sharp, snorting laugh, then drained the flask in three long gulps. He pointed it at Ben, grinning bitterly, his face blood-rich, his eyes flaring. "You," he groped, "you're no better'n *me*."

The statement hit Ben with the force of revelation. He'd spent half his life being "better" than his brother — nursing his anger, relishing the damage that infected his right hand with tremors, pulling moral rank. Shame suddenly heated his face. So *this* is what I am, Ben thought. He thought he saw Dennis clearly, too. This wasn't the clairvoyance of a Richard Hellman, nor even the scientific parsing of Doctors Pierce or Wright. It was personal, subjective, intimate, and it had the unfamiliar feel of reality.

"Here," Ben said, handing Sadler's statement to Dennis. "I can't help with this. *You* can't help it, either. What you can do, though — you can help Amy."

Dennis stared down at the statement. The pages fanned open in his hand. "This fucker . . . he'll let her waste herself on grief." He blinked his big, wet eyes and struggled for a breath.

Crying drunk, Ben thought. He'd seen it before, but he didn't feel the usual disgust this time. In fact, he almost laid a comforting hand on Dennis's shoulder. What held him back?

"She has to grieve, Dennis. Let her grieve. Stand by her," he said — and at the same moment thought, I sound like a greeting card. But the truth was the truth, no matter how common. "Don't hold back," he added, "but be patient with her. Be patient with yourself."

Dennis swayed a little, knees loosened by his stupor. "Awright," he drawled.

Over his brother's shoulder, Ben could see big snowflakes swarming past the black window again. The arctic blast had revived itself. Ben wondered briefly how long it might last, but stuck with what he knew for certain: the roads would be bad. Almost without thinking he held out his hand — the right one. For a second or two it trembled, but he stilled it with a not inconsiderable act of will.

“What,” Dennis said

Ben returned his bleary gaze. “Your keys, big brother. Don't want to fuck up that new boat of yours, do you? That new Imperial?”

Dennis gave him a look half pleased, half puzzled. “Pushy bastard,” he muttered, then fished the tinkling keys from his pocket.

“Mom says it's one sweet ride,” Ben said.

“Oh, it is,” Dennis said and flashed a wide, moist grin. Then, with the slow ceremoniousness so typical of the deeply drunk, he laid the keys carefully on his brother's upturned palm.