

## Part Two: Big Pharma.

## II.1

Ben couldn't yet tell how badly he would suffer for the rest of what he knew would be another very long day. When he was younger, he could endure three or four nights of minimal sleep and at worst feel only a little tired the next day. For the last year or so, however, a truly bad night meant pain all the way through, especially in his joints, a heavy blur around his eyes, and a distaste for humanity that was even greater than usual. The previous night he had gotten up twice for toast and several more to pee. But during the intervals between he had slept, and even, just before dawn, had the sliver of a dream. He was being lifted by an ocean wave at Revere Beach. It had carried him high and at its crest he had a view of the entire city of Boston, silent and still. No people, no cars or trains. Perhaps no one or nothing alive. Nonetheless, that frozen architecture was beautiful and from the top of his wave he looked at it appreciatively. There was someone in the wave next to him. When he awoke he couldn't figure out who this was. But then, like a flash, he saw the face clearly: a smirking Michael Degner.

He got out of bed and went directly into his shower. After singing a few bars of "Tonight" from *West Side Story*, Ben composed his agenda for the day. Fern was first on the list. She was as close as he could come to a connective thread. Degner was still stuck on her, of this he was pretty sure, and she was a woman alluring enough to fuel full-fledged madness. Even Neal was dazzled by her, although he'd never admit that. Maybe Degner had lost his mind and bumped off Brian. It wasn't the worst story he had ever come up with, even if it required putting a high-powered corporate executive into the improbable role of a street shooter. But Degner was a shooter—a sportsman who liked to

blast away at targets. Plus, he had a second motive: derailing Sweet Dreams and carving more room for himself in the crowded insomnia market.

The second item on his agenda was to find that missing hour. Bernie said he and Brian had parted ways around 9:00. Brian was killed about an hour later. But it was only a 10 minute walk from Bernie's condo to Brian's. Either Bernie was lying or Brian had gone somewhere else. Perhaps Brian was one of those men who didn't want to go home to his wife. Given Fern's beauty, however, even Ben had trouble imagining that.

And then there was Brian's computer. Had String grabbed it and then sold it, as Neal believed? And what sort of stuff was in there? Schematic drawings of molecules? Blue-prints of Sweet Dreams? Anything of use to someone in particular?

Possibly Fern would help him with the missing hour. She hadn't been particularly forthcoming during their first interview. Ben assumed she'd be up early with her children, as she had been yesterday when she called Missing Persons at 6:30, so he decided now to try her at around that time again today.

After showering, and tidying up his small apartment, making his crumpled bed and sweeping for crumbs in the kitchen, he turned his computer on to read about the London bombings. Suicides for sure. Starting to look like home-grown. The vast circuit of security cameras the Brits had installed throughout London may have snapped pictures of a couple of suspects. Ben stared into the small screen until his stomach began to tighten, and then turned the machine off. He went to his stoop to join President Sarmiento for a smoke. Another thick summer day was beginning, hotter and even more humid than yesterday, but the steps of the stoop, over which he could unfurl his long, aching limbs, felt cool and welcoming. He smoked and stared, and when he checked his watch it was

6:45, late enough to call Fern. He lifted his hulk up, felt the familiar flashes of sharp pain shoot through the tight muscles of his back, and so raised his arms high above his head in a half-hearted stretch, and returned inside.

“Mrs. Mortensen? This is Detective Kaplan,” he said as calmly as he could into his cell-phone. “I was wondering if I could visit with you for just a few minutes this morning. I know it’s a tough time right now, but I have some questions that you might be able to answer, and they’re important.”

She had grunted what he took to be a positive response, and Ben told her he’d be there in a half-hour or so. He flipped his cell shut. He assumed she would be as hostile as she had been yesterday, and he didn’t expect to learn too much from her. Still, he had to give it a shot. Stories never came unbidden. He knew that the only way to grab one was to get his hands dirty by digging on the street, picking up all the loose details, concocting, and most of all making mistakes. He had to move forward, even if he had no idea where he was going, in order for the pieces to fit and his chapters to fall in line. If he didn’t, this story would evaporate and poor Brian Mortensen would lie in the ground for eternity, unjustly murdered, no one having come forward to speak on his behalf.

Ben got into the battered Volvo, his old friend, and drove to Dorchester to pick up his pistol. Bobby had already left for work, but Ben had a key to the place, and sure enough the gun was waiting for him, safely encased in his holster, on the small table in the living room. “Thanks, pal,” Ben said out loud when he strapped the heavy and unlikable thing on his waist. He got back into his car and headed to the South End. It was still early and so the traffic was light.

He parked his car in front of Fern's building, but didn't go straight to her door. Instead, he crossed the street and walked through Peters Park to the dugout, which twenty-four hours earlier had been Brian Mortensen's last stop. The yellow crime-scene tape had been removed, and there were no other traces that the police had ever been there. But as Ben looked at the dirt floor he thought he could see, even though he knew he couldn't, the faint outline of Brian's snow-angel pose. He lit a cigarette and stared. Who killed this guy, and why'd he do it? No answers, or even guesses, were forthcoming. Only a silent recognition of an awful deed.

He crushed his half-smoked cigarette into the dirt, and turned to leave. But before he did so he muttered, to himself and a world that wasn't listening, "don't worry, kid. I'll be back."

Fern buzzed him up almost immediately, and when he got to her door it was already open for him.

Once again, she was dressed in workout clothes, a loose fitting tee-shirt and a pair of bright red running shorts whose color perfectly matched her shoes. She was hardly a tall woman but her legs, strong and lithe, looked longer than they really were. Her tee-shirt carried the name of a restaurant named "Puffins" in Monterey and was decorated with the picture of what seemed to be a bran muffin. Her luxurious black hair was perfectly messy and did a fine job of framing her face. To Ben's surprise, she smiled at him when she opened the door. She invited him in and led him into the large kitchen where Emma and Kate were sitting at the table quietly, busy with their breakfast cereal and their crayons. They briefly looked up at him, but didn't acknowledge his existence.

The room was subdued, but there was no sign of trauma, no feel of despair. It wasn't quite cheerful, but it felt like a typical morning in a typical home. The inappropriateness of the feeling made Ben cringe.

Fern offered him tea, which he declined, and he stood, leaning against the counter as she pattered around the stove. Before Ben could begin his questions, Fern shot one of her own. "So what's your theory about the London bombings, Detective? Were they British or foreigners?"

"My guess is home-grown, Mrs. Mortensen."

"Fern. Call me Fern."

"Okay. But then you have to call me Ben."

"Deal."

Ben wasn't sure whether he was more surprised by her friendliness or his response to it.

"I'm betting they're second generation Pakistani kids," Ben said. "Probably have some education. They've been on the outside for a long time and Iraq has pushed them over the edge. They need a dream to match their rage and their firing hormones, and 9/11 was the best advertisement in history. So now that Osama's the new Saladin they're going to change the world, be part of history, liven up their drab lazy lives, unleash their fury, and the best way to do that is to kill a bunch of innocent people on a train in order to please their beloved God. And to go up in flames themselves. It's easy to imagine. Young men do things like that."

"Did *you* do things like that when you were a young man?"

He was taken back by her question, but once again even more so by his willingness to answer. "Sort of, I guess. I went to Vietnam."

"Why?"

"I couldn't stand where I was at the time, and I thought Communism was a really bad idea."

"Was it?"

"Yes."

"Did you kill anybody?"

"Probably."

"What did that feel like?"

"Feel like?" Ben tried to remember but couldn't. "It was a long time ago. I was young. People were trying to kill me first so it didn't seem all that strange."

"But you must remember what it was like. It must have been the most intense time of your life. You haven't forgotten the moment, have you? When your bullets hit somebody. Was it horrible to take somebody's life away? Did you feel dirty afterwards?"

"No, nothing like that. I never even knew who I was shooting at, or what it was that I hit. I just hoped that I'd shoot them before they'd shoot me. We were all doing the same thing, playing by the same rules. I didn't feel like I was taking anything away from them. I was giving them what they deserved."

"So, you never actually looked at a man you killed?"

"Probably not. You'd fire into the bush, then find bodies later. Couldn't tell who killed who. Maybe I never hit anybody."

"Did any of your friends get killed?"

Ben was silent. He remembered his Lieutenant, Mack Halsey, a distant relative of the famous admiral. Mack's head had been blown to bits, but he didn't mention this to Fern.

"Yes. A few. It wasn't pretty."

"I bet it wasn't. I'm sorry. Did you ever kill any civilians?"

"I hope not. I don't think so. But I might have. It wasn't the smartest war, and the people running it usually didn't know what they were doing. As I found out later. I was just a kid."

For a painful, stabbing moment, Ben felt like telling her more. But then he reminded himself that the only thing he knew about this woman was that she was astonishingly beautiful. And that she was no longer the shell-shocked shrew of yesterday. Instead she felt warm and inviting. She was standing close to him, looking directly into his eyes. When she lightly brushed her fingers against his hand, a gesture so gracefully swift that he could not pull away, he felt a jolt from head to toe. Catching himself, Ben said "Back to you Fern. I'm trying to figure out a little more about Brian's schedule yesterday."

When he said this, she stepped away from him, her jaw locked, her eyes glazed over in blankness, and her beautiful face was submerged by the same cloud he had seen yesterday. She turned her back on him in order to tend to the tea-kettle on the stove.

"You said that Brian always carried his laptop in his backpack?"

"Yeah," she grunted, without turning around.

"We found the pack and his wallet but no computer."

"So?"



“So we’re wondering what happened to it, that’s all. Could there have been something in there that somebody wanted?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Something to do with Brian’s work.”

“It was his computer. How would I know what was in there?” Now facing him squarely, a look of disgust contorted her perfectly shaped face.

Ben wanted to pursue this line but decided against it. “Another question, if you don’t mind.”

She didn’t reply.

“What do you think of Michael Degner?”

This time she threw a furious stare at him, and then nearly shouted, “He’s a pig.”

“I get that impression. But why do *you* say that?”

“He takes what he wants, doesn’t care what it costs, or who it hurts. He sees something that appeals to him and then grabs it. And if he can’t get what he wants he gets mad. That’s your Michael Degner.”

“And he wanted Brian?”

“Yes. Brian had some skills Degner needed, and he couldn’t stand it that Brian wouldn’t leave Casper.” She nearly chuckled.

“Why wouldn’t he leave Casper?”

“A *nice shop* is what Brian used to say. They were going ahead on some sort of big project, and Brian was all excited about that. And he was making plenty of money,” she smirked.

“You didn’t care about the money?”

“Not much. We don’t buy anything, at least nothing big. Except this house. We don’t take vacations, I don’t buy clothes. We don’t need that much money. It’s absurd how much all these people make.”

“You’d be content with less?”

“Yes I would,” she said defiantly. “I certainly don’t have to live in a fancy condo in the South End of Boston.”

“What would you like?”

“A bungalow in California would be nice. Simple. Warm.”

“You don’t like the cold?”

“I hate it.”

“So, were you in touch with Degner?”

“I saw him once at a party. There was some sort of benefit at Epochal that Brian made me go to. He said it was a fund-raiser for an adult literacy program. I think it was just a chance for the big-shots to network. Anyway, we paid a lot of money for the tickets. I saw Michael there, and we talked a little bit. Although with Michael you don’t really do a lot of talking. Just a lot of listening.”

“Did Degner want you back, Fern?”

She shot him a glance of sheer hatred and didn’t respond.

“Please, Fern, I’m trying to put together a picture. I know you and Degner were involved back in California. I think there’s a possibility he still had some interest in you.”

“Did he say that?” She looked interested.

“No. But in my business it’s often what people don’t say that matters most.”

“He might have had interest. Most men do,” she said without the slightest trace of pride. “I wouldn’t give him the time of day, though.”

“Did he make advances at you?”

“Not really. I’m a married woman after all—or at least I was—and our breakup back in California was a little bit on the nasty side. The only time he’s actually talked to me since we came back to Boston was at that party. He cornered me, and told me how glad he was to see me. He kept touching my shoulders, and telling me he wanted us to be friends.”

She glanced nervously in the direction of Emma and Kate, whose attention wasn’t directed at the adults at all, but to the whole-wheat cheerios scattered on the table.

“How are they holding up?” Ben asked.

“Holding up?” Fern seemed puzzled by the question. “Oh, they’re fine. They’re too young to understand what’s going on. Their father wasn’t around very much. He always came home so late, and sometimes he’d even sleep at the lab. So they don’t miss him. Do you actually think Michael Degner had something to do with all this?”

Ben ignored the question. “And you? How are you holding up, Fern?”

She looked at him with her large eyes, which now looked mournful. “Not great. I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“Go back to California? Your family’s there, aren’t they.”

Her eyes shifted back to hatred: “I’m not going back.”

“I’m sorry. All right, next question. I’m trying to figure out Brian’s schedule last night. As far as I can tell, he left work with Bernie Olen at 8. That means they got to

Bernie's apartment around 8:45. It should have taken Brian another 10 minutes or so to get home. But you told me he didn't call you until 10. There's an hour or so missing."

"Bernie," she said, nearly coughing on his name.

"What's he like?"

She paused before answering. "He's a good scientist and a hard worker. At least, that's what Brian always said."

"He's gay, isn't he?"

"Of course he's gay. He doesn't hide it."

"Does he flaunt it?"

"No, not really. Except the way all gay men always flaunt it."

"How's that?"

"Oh, you know, of course you do. The way they move their hands, draw attention to themselves, make a fuss about stupid details."

"Did Bernie have a boyfriend? Someone he brought to company picnics?"

"There weren't any company picnics."

"Okay. Then how about barbeques at Casper's house?"

"Bernie would come alone."

"He and Brian were close?"

"They worked together, that's it."

Ben allowed silence to linger for a good twenty seconds, but Fern had shut down. After staring at him for a few seconds, she nearly shouted at him, "why the hell are you asking me all these stupid questions? You got the guy who did it, that's what I was told

yesterday. A black kid from the projects, just like you'd expect. He's behind bars, isn't he Detective? He can't hurt anybody else, can he?"

"No, he can't. But I'm not sure he did it."

She looked at him in despair.

"Fern, I can't figure out that missing hour. Do you have any ideas at all? When Brian called you did he say when he'd be home?"

"Soon. He said soon."

"But he wasn't specific?"

"I don't remember."

"He woke you up, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"Did he know that he woke you up?"

"Probably. I wasn't too friendly."

"Did you know that he had been with Bernie?"

"No. I mean, if I had thought about it I would have been able to guess. They usually came home from the lab together. Your questions are starting to bug me, Detective."

"Any idea at all what Brian could have been doing for that hour? Did he ever stop at a bar on his way home?"

She snorted, "Brian?"

"So, no idea where he was from 9 till 10?"

"Of course not! I was asleep."

“I’m sorry, I have to ask you these questions. Thank you for answering them, Fern, and for your time. I know this is difficult.”

“You don’t know a thing, Detective, as far as I can tell.”

Ben stared at her, and smiled. Another way to keep her talking occurred to him.

“What did you think of Brian’s work?”

“His work?”

“Pharmaceuticals. Bio-tech.”

Her beautiful face went still, and she remained silent. But just as Ben was preparing to apologize for asking her the question she replied, “I think it’s gotten...gotten...gotten out of hand. At some point people just have to make a go of it on their own, don’t they? We all have problems. These biotech guys want to make pills to make all of our problems disappear. And they won’t. They want to make life painless, but it’s not going to happen. Big Pharma is way out of control.”

“What’s out of control about it?”

“We should try to live without their miraculous drugs. Just try to make the best of it.”

“But haven’t their drugs helped you in the past?” Ben remembered the story Degner had told him about Fern’s depression.

“No, they nearly killed me, that’s what they did. I was feeling low and then I was stupid enough to let the doctors give me anti-depressants. I never even asked them what they were pumping into my body. And they nearly killed me. I haven’t taken any medications since then.”

“And your depression went away by itself?”

She looked at him for a few seconds. “There’s a book you should read, Ben. It’s called *Health Cares*. When I was making dinner for the girls I heard the author interviewed on *All Things Considered* and he seemed really smart and not at all full of himself. Daniel Roder is his name.” Her tone had changed so abruptly that it nearly left Ben breathless. “The book’s about a philosophy professor in Iowa. He’s totally sick of drugs and medicine and the whole technology thing, and he decides to do something about it. It’s great, you should read it. It’s about how we have to suffer, have to live with pain, and how modern medicine just tries to cover up all our problems but really doesn’t. It’s a good book. I’m done with it if you want to borrow it.”

“Thanks, I would like that.”

“Emma,” she barked at her older daughter. “There’s a book next to mommy’s bed. It’s got a picture of corn on the cover. Would you get it please?”

The little girl dutifully bolted to the bedroom, and in a flash returned with the book. It wasn’t terribly thick and it had a picture of a flourishing cornfield on its cover. When he glanced at the book he suddenly realized it was the same one that Holly had mentioned to him the night before. Ben opened it and started paging through. Then he looked up at Fern. “What about Brian? He was working for a pharmaceutical company. Did you have a problem with his research too?”

“Brain,” she said, “Brian, he wasn’t aggressive. He was cerebral. He liked to solve problems but didn’t have much interest in anything else. He certainly wasn’t hoping to save humanity from its pain. It was the computer screen he loved best.”

“So he wasn’t like Michael Degner?”

Fern smiled. “Not at all. Michael’s a beast, and you’re right: he’s exactly the type that’s causing our problems. ‘Big-pharma’ they call it, and he’s the one.”

“The one?”

“The one who, you know, epitomizes it all. Top-dog.”

“And Brian was what? A pussy-cat?”

“Pretty much,” she said, and she smiled beautifully one more time.

“Thanks again, Fern,” Ben said reluctantly. “I’ll see myself out.”

“No, that’s all right Ben, I’ll walk you to the door.”

She walked with him down the long hallway. When they reached the door, she stopped and put her hand on his wrist. “Thanks for coming here Ben,” she said earnestly. Her hand gripped his wrist with such force that Ben actually looked at it.

“You’re welcome, Fern.”

“Come back any time. Really, any time. Day or night. I’m always here, you know. Bet you can’t guess the nicknames I’ve given my children?”

“What?”

“One is Ball and the other is Chain.”

Ben fought through the cloud of puzzlement that blanketed him and managed to say, “One last question, Fern.”

She didn’t look happy.

“Are you a good sleeper? You said Brian woke you up at 10. Did you sleep through the night?”

“I sleep like a baby.”

“But babies get up every two hours and cry.”



Fern laughed. “Not that kind of baby. More like my girls. Put them down and they’re gone for the night.”

“Thanks for your help Fern. I’ll call you if there’s anything else I need to ask.”

“You do that Ben,” she replied, finally letting go of his wrist.

Feeling a little shaken, with currents of energy running through him from all directions, Ben headed to the Starbucks near Fern’s house, but it was too crowded to find a seat so he didn’t go in. It was only 7:45 and Neal wouldn’t be at the station yet. He needed to eat something, drink coffee, smoke and think. He decided to hop over to Rusty’s in South Boston, a neighborhood diner close to Pleasure Bay.

Rusty’s was bereft of pretense and ornament. It had a counter with a dozen seats, and 10 booths. There were pictures of various Red Sox players on the walls: a very old one of Ted Williams in the center surrounded by Yaz, Tiant, Carlton Fisk, Johnny Damon, Curt Schilling, Jason Varitek. The chatty waitresses poured endless cups of weak coffee, and served eggs, bacon, potatoes, and heavily buttered toast. Lots of cops went there, most of them local guys from Southie, and Ben nodded to a few he recognized when he entered. As soon as he sat down at the counter, the waitress brought him a cup of coffee without his having asked for it, and he ordered the sort of greasy breakfast he liked best. He wasn’t in the mood for more toast, so he got a bran muffin instead. He paged through the *Globe*, which he had picked up on the way in, but all the headlines were about London so he turned to the Sports Page and read about last night’s game, which the Red Sox had won. But it wasn’t the playoffs, so it wasn’t worth getting excited about. Ben ate quickly and when he was done left a big tip.

Exiting the diner he was greeted by the heat of a day soon to become unbearable and by the spectacle of Pleasure Bay, an almost perfectly circular body of water formed by a jetty, on top of which was a promenade. There were already a good number of walkers and joggers, as well as cyclists and roller bladers. There were even a couple of people swimming. Boats large and small were on the harbor beyond the jetty, sea gulls were squacking, and airplanes were taking off and landing at the nearby Logan Airport. Pleasure Bay, a public place used by real people, most of whom lived in the neighborhood, was busy and its buzz felt soothing to Ben. Enjoying the cool breeze coming off the water, he walked to a cluster of benches at the midpoint of the promenade and stopped for a smoke.

The Brian Mortensen story was taking dim shape, but far too slowly. Most obvious was the tall black kid who was now locked up. Stringbean had been lost to the streets and so, despite Bobby's claims, he certainly was capable of doing serious damage with a gun. Still, it was Degner who claimed Ben's attention. He had a thing for the lovely and maybe looney Fern, and in a different way for Brian as well. He was as aggressive and focused as Fern was erratic. And Brian? All Ben had to go on was the faraway, bemused look on his face in the wedding photo, and the fact that he was a genius behind the computer screen on the verge of unlocking the secrets of sleep and finding the ticket to Sweet Dreams.

Ben was convinced that there was a story lurking in his hodge-podge of possibilities, one that would put his cast of characters into play and his episodes into a proper sequence. Or maybe, he worried, Neal had it right. Maybe there was no story at all. Just a stoned Stringbean who blew away an innocent man because he needed some

cash and didn't have the wherewithal to make a plan. If this was true then Ben's hope of finding organic unity was over, but at least a bad guy was already behind bars. His job would be finished without his having done anything more than consulting Willie McGee. It didn't feel right to him, but if that's the way it was going to turn he would just go on to the next job, the next stiff, the next shattered heart. One after another those stiffs had walked through his life, replacing his wife and sons, becoming his only faithful companions. Sometimes they merged into a faceless mob of misery. Other times they had become friends to whom he owed the fiercest loyalty. He remembered these dead best of all because he had penetrated their stories so thoroughly that he could figure out the ending himself. He knew who killed them...and why.

He remembered Andrea Nightingale. A tall and heavy blonde with a round, acne-scarred face, she had been found dead in a dumpster in an alley behind a club in Brighton. A thoroughly plain looking young woman, she had been wearing a short skirt, long socks striped with every color of the rainbow, and running shoes the brightest color of orange Ben had ever seen. Her outfit said to him that even a drab life could be livened up with just a bit of effort. Not surprisingly, then, by all accounts Andrea had been a kind, good humored woman who had many friends and always wore colorful socks. A secretary at the Harvard Business School, Ben could find no one who disliked her. She just had the terrible misfortune of running into one Paul O'Neil, an overweight, cocaine snorting real estate agent who didn't like to be told no. He was waiting for her when she left the club. He forced her into the alley where, as he explained to the jury, the drugs had just taken over and he, only trying to be affectionate, put far too much pressure on her throat. He had panicked, he said, when he realized she was dead, and even though she

was heavy he heaved her into the dumpster. The DA did his job well that day, and the jury rang his number. O'Neil would be behind bars for the rest of his life.

Ben had done right by Andrea, even though it meant interviewing nearly half the people who had been at the club that night. He finally found O'Neil only because a tattooed biker named Jimmy Buck remembered a softly thick and perspiring man dressed inappropriately in a suit hitting on a skinny young woman who got angry at him and told him to go fuck himself. Ben found this woman, a graduate student in sociology at Northeastern, and she remembered an obnoxious fat guy bragging about the big condominium in Cambridge he had just sold. Fortunately, on that one occasion O'Neil had been telling the truth, and Ben nailed him by looking into the records of every real-estate transaction that had taken place in Cambridge on that day.

Andrea's mother, who came from Ohio and was as heavy and plain looking as her daughter, thanked him. Ben told her that he was not only sorry for her loss, but that he was sure her daughter was a fine human being. The mother, who knew he meant what he said, nodded in agreement and pressed his hand with her own. Ben spent that night on Bobby Doyle's couch, far too drunk even to consider driving home.

Ben lit another cigarette and opened up the book Fern had given him, the one that both she and Holly had been reading. The first few pages were about a guy who was making breakfast for his three daughters, and so Ben double-checked the cover to make sure the novel hadn't been written by a woman. It wasn't, so he thumbed through the book quickly and found lengthy passages where the main character, a professor named Harold Larson, was ranting about modern medicine, and especially about modern meds, the pride of the pharmaceutical industry, and how they were slowly eating away the

American soul by making people weak and cowardly and incapable of facing up to the suffering that is the backbone of human existence. Harold seemed significantly off-kilter—he wanted to personally visit Hillary Clinton and explain his ideas about the woes of modern medicine to her—and so the book started to look interesting.

As Ben was reading a young woman who had been jogging sat down on the bench next to his and began to talk into her cell phone. Loudly. She was complaining that her boyfriend had arrived late for their dinner date the previous night. Ben was more annoyed than usual, so he resorted to his favorite tactic. He began to whistle. Ben had inherited from his father the singular talent of a powerful whistle, and he put all the air he had in his nicotine weakened lungs into his version of “Luck Be a Lady Tonight.” As stirring and offensive as he hoped his music-making would be, it seemed to have no impact at all on the cell-phoner. Ben declared defeat, and stamped out his cigarette. He stood up and lingered for a moment to make sure the woman would notice how tall he was. But he kept his back to her so that he wouldn’t actually frighten her, and after a few seconds returned to his car. Neal would be at the station by now and Ben was glad they could get back to work.

## II.2

When he got to the station, Sally, exuding warmth, had a strangely pleased look on her face. Ben's was curious and so he asked her what was up. It turned out that she had just gotten engaged. Her boyfriend, an electrician named Tweed, had proposed last night and she had accepted. She showed Ben the tiny diamond ring on her finger. Because of the bloodbath in London, both had been subdued while they were eating dinner, and Sally wondered whether Tweed had proposed just to cheer her up. Ben had assured her that this wasn't the case.

Ben thought that Tweed was an odd name, but Sally explained that his parents had been hippies and that all four of his siblings were named after a fabric. Ben knew the man a little, for he often came to the station to pick Sally up after work, and when he did he always stuck around long enough to chat. Tweed was cheerful and well-groomed, and he seemed devoted to Sally. Ben approved of him, and was glad that Sally, who was a decent soul even if not the brightest of bulbs, would be well-matched. He congratulated her, and meant what he said. He wanted to give her a hug, but resisted the urge.

When he found his partner, Neal was peering so intently at his computer screen that he didn't notice Ben's arrival.

“What are you looking for?”

Neal was startled, and looked up. “More info on Degner.”

“You warming up on this one and coming over to my side? Might not be Winfred Bennett after all?”

Neal whirled around on his chair and pretended to be angry at Ben: “I said no such thing! Bennett’s the shooter. But there is something about Degner I don’t like.”

“Join the club.”

“I also found something you might find interesting.”

“Let it rip.”

“It’s not Degner. It’s about his father.”

“Yeah?”

“Better sit down first.”

Ben was wary but complied.

“I was digging around, checking out stuff from his home town and you’ll never guess what I found?”

“Surprise me, amigo,” Ben said wearily.

“It turns out his father met Hitler.”

“What?”

“I found an article about Robert Degner in the archive of *Lubbock Daily Register*. That’s Degner’s hometown. February 1, 1944: ‘*Lt. Degner Recalls Memorable Visit with Hitler Back in ’37.*’ Check out how it begins: ‘*Der Fuehrer desires to see you. The three young Americans, residents of our very own Lubbock, were seated in the lobby of a hotel in Berlin, Germany, looked at each other in surprise and then nodded their heads in agreement.*’

“Jesus,” Ben said softly.

Turns out that Robert Degner was biking through Europe after graduating from high-school in 1937. When he checked into his hotel in Berlin he was required to register

with the authorities and the next thing he knew, as he explained to his hometown newspaper when he returned to Texas, was that he had been summoned to meet with Adolph Hitler.

*“Hitler was quite friendly”* Neal continued reading, *“and treated us very cordially during the 20 minutes we talked with him in his room. He asked us a great many questions about what we thought of the ‘new Germany’ and of conditions in the United States. It was obvious that he was more or less trying to sound us out on American sentiment and opinion toward himself.”*

Neal paused, scanning the screen again. “Check this out,” he said. *“We spent several weeks bicycling through Germany. I was tremendously impressed by the cleanliness and orderliness which prevailed everywhere in the towns and on the farms. Even the underbrush and twigs in the forests had been cut and stacked neatly.”*

“Sweet Jesus,” Ben repeated.

Neal didn’t respond.

“Was Robert Degner a Nazi?”

“Not at all,” Neal replied. “He became a Lieutenant, fought in Europe. This is the way the article ends: *‘The young officer would like to get back and help put across the final blows on the crumbling war machine, which he saw so carefully built in the days of peace. ‘Next time I see der Fuehrer,’ says Lieutenant Degner, ‘our meeting won’t be quite so cordial.’* He left the army in 1946. Then he became a successful banker. Probably was a Republican, but no Nazi.”

“I know, but still...met with Hitler. That’s hard to imagine.”

“Like touching evil.”



“Exactly.”

Ben excused himself and went outside for a smoke. Even with the nicotine he couldn't think his way into the fact that Michael Degner's father had met Hitler. He told himself that this was surely an inconsequential bit of information. Robert Degner had apparently done no more than go on a bike trip with school friends and just happened to end up in Berlin. Still, he had been in the same room, had breathed the same air, as Hitler himself. And had described him as *quite friendly*. Ben shuddered, and took a deep drag of smoke. Having finally composed himself, he went back inside and returned to Neal's desk, where once again his partner was totally lost to his screen.

“Anything back on the pistol?”

Neal looked up, annoyed. “Nah. Nobody here's doing a thing. We've been bumped up to Orange, so normal crimes like ours are being put on hold.”

“Damn,” Ben said. “The longer we wait...”

“I know,” Neal interrupted. And he turned back to the screen.

Ben stood over his partner's desk, not knowing what to do with himself.

“Here's a thought,” he said.

“Shoot,” Neal replied, without enthusiasm.

“Maybe there's some connection between Stringbean and Degner. Maybe Degner paid him to do the dirty work.”

Neal straightened up and stared at Ben. “Where do you get these ideas?”

“I'm a creative guy, Neal.”

“Creative my ass. You actually think you can tie this poor kid to the CEO of Epochal Pharmaceuticals?”

“Probably not. But what if we check out the low-level employees at Epochal. Janitors. Cleaning service. Maybe some poorly paid African-American there knew Stringbean, and that’s how Degner made the connection and got the job done.”

“You think Degner consorted with African-American janitors?” Neal said, his voice tinged with affectionate sacrasms.

“Probably not. But why don’t we find out who works at Epochal.”

“And how do we do that? Just ask Doctor D. for a list of employees?”

“Nah, too soon to tip him off that he’s a suspect.”

“I was kidding, you asshole. He’s not even close to being a suspect, Ben.”

“That’s true. But what if we could sneak into his payroll. Find out who’s over there. See if there’s another kid like Stringbean who comes from our part of town.”

“I don’t know how you’re going to do that, but if you want to try, go ahead, be my guest.”

“I’ll ask Chloë. She’s usually good for a few laughs.”

Neal smiled. “Go ahead. Ask Chloë if she can hack into Epochal’s files. Wish her good luck for me.”

“Will do,” Ben replied. “How’d you guys do last night? Alice calm down when you got home?”

“Not really.” For the first time in their conversation Neal seemed to have forgotten the computer screen. He looked mournfully at Ben and said, “the bombings upset her a lot. Said she won’t take the train to work anymore.”

“I’m sorry. How she’s going to get downtown?”

“She hasn’t figured that out yet. I drove her this morning.”

“By the way,” Ben interrupted, “I interviewed Fern.”

“You did what?” Neal said, his demeanor shifting into high-gear annoyance.

“I interviewed Fern. A couple of hours ago. Trying to figure out what Brian’s schedule was. When he called her, what he said, what she said. See if there was anything at all she could tell me.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Too early in the morning.”

Neal softened. “Did she help?”

“Not really.”

“Next time, let me know, would you please.”

“Why? You want to pay a visit to the lovely Fern?”

“Watch it,” Neal said sharply. “I’m part of this investigation, that’s all.”

“Got it, Chief, got it,” Ben said cheerfully.

His mind still crackling at Neal’s discovery about Degner’s father, a discovery that he couldn’t process, Ben ambled over to Chloë’s office in the basement of the station. It was nothing more than a rectangular space made from movable plastic walls, a small refrigerator in the corner, and a metal desk that was carrying three large computer screens and a dozen empty Diet Coke cans. She was sitting on a wooden chair. As usual the tiny woman, built like a gnome, with perfectly straight bright brown hair, schoolmarm clothes, and enormous glasses, was staring into her screen.

“Hello dear,” Ben said.

“What do you want?” she barked without looking up.

Immediately Ben felt better. “Truth,” he said. “And so of course I came to you.”

“Go fuck yourself, big man,” Chloë replied, but Ben could tell she was already softening.

“We had a murder yesterday. A guy named Brian Mortensen. We got a guy locked up. Had Brian’s wallet and a .22.”

“I’m shaking in my boots. What do you want from me?” she said as she turned away from the screen and began to stare at the ceiling.

“I’m curious about the background story. I need the whole picture, Chloë, and maybe you can help.”

“Curiosity kills cats like you. You think I’ve nothing better to do than meet your pathetic needs? Right after the bombings they bumped us all up to Orange. I’ve been busy looking at Muslim men in Boston between the ages of 20 and 30 who just happened to have visited either London or Pakistan during the last six months. How you like that, big man? Do you know how many students and professor and doctors and researchers there are in this town who fit that profile?”

“Let me guess.”

“Don’t bother.”

“Okay.”

“Then go fuck yourself again. I’m too busy.”

“Come on Chloë, they’re just putting you through the same old drill. Window-dressing, pretend to do something. That’s all. Make people feel useful when they’re not. All we do is blow steam.”

Chloë finally looked at Ben through her clumsy lens. “You think I don’t know that?” she said softly.

“Right. But you can do something useful. You can help me. This poor guy gets shot through the heart for no good reason and I want to know who did it. I owe it to him.”

At first, the tiny woman didn’t respond, which Ben took to be a good sign. Then she sighed: “so, what do you want me to do?”

“Hack into the personnel files of Epochal Pharmaceuticals. Find out if they’ve got a bad guy on the payroll who we can tie to our suspect. We think there might be a link.”

Chloë looked interested, but pretended to be appalled. “But wouldn’t that be illegal?” she asked snidely.

“Probably.”

“Then you know I won’t do it.”

“The last of the Mohicans.”

“Get me a warrant and you’ve got a friend.”

Ben looked defeated. But only for a few seconds, for at that moment he thought of Moira. “Okay, I’ll get you a warrant. No shit, Chloë, this is more important than looking for Muhammad.”

She looked convinced. “I’ll do it,” she said. “But only if you promise to go fuck yourself.”

“Deal,” Ben agreed cheerfully.

In a sullen mood, with thoughts of Michael Degner and bombed out London subways dancing through his head, Ben had to drive through heavy traffic to get to

Bullfinch Street, home of the Suffolk County District Attorney's office. A non-descript building whose first floor was a slightly disheveled health club, it hardly inspired reverence for the law. Still, it was a place Ben typically enjoyed visiting, because here he would see Moira Monahan. Today, however, he wasn't even looking forward to that. As he got out of his car and remembered the awkward moment he had with her on the previous day a wave of dread washed over him and nearly stopped him in his tracks. But as usual Ben persevered.

When Moira saw him enter the office she perked up immediately, and her substantial and long limbed body activated. But as soon as she stood up, Ben noticed that she, almost visibly, suppressed whatever it was she had been feeling. She was wearing a pair of shapeless white pants and a long sleeved orange silk shirt that Ben thought looked good on her. A jacket was draped on the back of her desk chair.

"Detective, to what do I owe this great honor?" Moira asked without being too friendly.

"A question, Moira," Ben said. "We want to find out more about Michael Degner. We think he might have something to do with the Mortensen shooting. Or at least I do."

"You've got the bad guy behind bars. We're going to arraign him for first degree-murder today. Why're you spinning your wheels on this one?"

"We're not sure we have the right guy. This kid Bennett might be telling the truth, that he just found the gun and the wallet on the street. I know it doesn't sound plausible. But I'm not sure he's smart enough to cook the whole thing up."

"Is that what you think? Does lying really take such brains?"

"Good lying does."

“And what makes for a good liar, Detective?”

“A storyteller. Someone who puts together a coherent narrative. One that makes sense, whose pieces fit together. Stringbean’s got that sort of story. And his girlfriend echoes it.”

“Ben, please, he was found with *the* gun! And we know he’s a bad guy.”

“Not that bad, at least according to my sources. Look, Moira, you might be right, but we have to check out other options. We owe it to him.”

“To whom?” She looked genuinely puzzled.

“To Brian. We’ve got to get this straight.”

“I thought you were going to say to Bennett.”

“Him too. But my job is to figure out what happened to Brian. We owe him that. He was shot through the heart, and now he’ll never see his little girls again. Some asshole took that away from him. We owe him an explanation.”

Moira looked at Ben and saw how serious he was.

“Is that what justice is, Ben? Telling the right story?”

“Telling the truth.”

“But you just told me that all stories are lies.”

“All lies are stories. Maybe not vice-versa. Or maybe they are. Sometimes I wonder.”

“Wonder about what?”

“Maybe this truth of ours is just something we make up.”

“Baloney,” Moira said.

“Will you help us Moira? Get us some sort of warrant.”

“How can I do that? There’s no probable cause, as far as I can tell. Degner’s not actually a suspect, is he?”

“No, not yet. But I don’t like him.”

“Why not?”

“He plays with guns. He’s Big Pharma, a power-hungry pig who peddles drugs for a living.”

“Drugs that help people. You left that out.”

“Right.”

“Legal drugs.”

“Right.”

“Then why should I get you a search warrant?”

“His father met Hitler.”

“What?”

Ben paused before he spoke. He closed his eyes and tried to make sure that he had heard Neal correctly. “His father met Hitler. Neal found a newspaper story about it on the Internet. Robert Degner was an exchange student in Berlin when he was in high-school. Had a picture taken of himself and Hitler in 1937.”

Moira looked stunned. “Wow.”

“I know.”

“Was Robert Degner a Nazi? Is Michael Degner a Nazi? What’s any of this got to do with the price of tea in China?”

Ben looked sheepish. “Don’t know. Sins of the father. Who knows. Probably nothing.”



“His father was a high-school student in, what’d you say, 1937? That’s your evidence?”

Ben didn’t reply.

“Means nothing,” Moira said with some force.

“You’re probably right. Still, I don’t like it.”

Moira studied him. “You’re not bullshitting me on this one, are you? You actually think Degner has something to do with this? Not counting the met-with-Hitler nonsense.”

“We think there’s a chance, yes,” Ben said.

“Well, this is a little insane, and I could probably get fired for even suggesting it. But we can work him through as a PTS.”

“What’s that?”

“Possible Terrorist Suspect. The Patriot Act opens up all sorts of doors for us law enforcement folks. Especially when we’re on Orange Alert. I can get you a search warrant in minutes if we count Degner as a PTS.”

“But he’s got nothing to do with terrorism,” Ben said, his voice sounding confused.

“He has nothing to do with Hitler either,” Moira barked at him. For a moment Moira was lost in thought. Then she continued, “But if you promise not to push it too far, and we make sure nothing goes public, nobody will even bother to check. There’s such a pile of these kinds of low-level search warrants that you can always sneak one through. You just have to promise me to keep quiet about it, and that if Degner ever does go to trial, which he won’t, there’ll be no mention of it.”

“This sounds good Moira. We won’t tell a soul. Just do a little looking around into his employee records. Chloë can hack into them at the station, and then we’ll erase all the evidence. We just want to see if one of Degner’s employees is a bad guy, that’s all. And if we find out that he is, we’ll just pretend to have happened upon him. Who would it hurt?”

“The Constitution,” Moira said. “My beloved conscience. Degner’s not even a suspect, much less a suspected terrorist.”

“We’re all suspects, Moira,” Ben said.

“Drop the bullshit, Ben. I’ll get you a temporary computer-search warrant. A license to hack. But it will last for only 24 hours.”

“Great. We’ll go fishing around Epochal’s files and check out who works for him. See if anyone has a record. Or maybe someone, a janitor or window-washer has a connection with our dear Winfred Bennett.”

“Okay. You got it. One hacking license. But only for 24 hours. You go in and you come out, and you don’t go back. And you don’t say a word to anyone.”

“Thank you Moira.”

As he stood up to leave, Ben paused. He was moved to explain his actions of yesterday. He didn’t know exactly why. But he did think that Moira’s awkward sweetness might have something to do with it.

“Look, Moira, I’m sorry about yesterday. I was abrupt. I would have liked to go out with you to lunch, but when I’m on a case it’s hard for me to concentrate on anything else. I’m a nobody away from work.”

“And you’re always at work.”

“Something like that, yeah.”

She looked at him hard. “So do you want to have lunch with me *today*?”

“I don’t think I can. I’m just starting to get inside of this case and when that happens I can’t think straight about anything else. It’s bugging me, I dream about it. When I dream. I’ve got to keep pressing. I don’t think String’s the shooter and I know Michael Degner’s a big-time asshole. He’s doing some nasty business somewhere. I learned that he had a thing for Brian’s wife. They were involved back in California and she dumped him. And then Brian snubbed him here in Boston when Degner approached him with a job offer. Brian’s a major talent, a computer genius who makes up molecules on his screen, and he was working on some sort of breakthrough project. Degner wanted a piece of the action, or to stifle it and leave the market open for himself. And he wanted his wife. But it wasn’t working out, and failure’s not something Degner puts up with. He put a lot of pressure on Brian, but the geek wouldn’t budge. So, Degner gets frustrated, blows a gasket, and either shoots the poor stiff himself, or hires somebody to do it. He’s got a double motive, and so he tried to kill two birds with one stone, the stone that went through Brian’s heart.”

“Money and sex?”

“Power and sex.”

“Some people think those are one and the same.”

“In Degner’s case, they’d probably be right.”

“And one more thing: Brian’s computer is missing. Maybe it had, I don’t know, trade secrets or something on it. Maybe that’s what this is all about.”

“What kind of project was Brian working on?”

“Something to do with sleeping pills. Don’t ask me to explain because I don’t understand it. All I do is watch the TV commercials. I like the one with the butterfly.”

“That’s Lunesta. And it’s not a butterfly, but a luna moth. That’s the one I use.”

“You gotta be careful with those, Moira. They can be addictive. And no one knows what their side effects are. You read about the guy in Buffalo? He took some sort of sleeping pill and when he woke up he found he had torn a towel rack out of a wall. And he didn’t remember a thing.”

Moira laughed warmly. “Don’t worry about me, Ben. I’m careful. I only take them once in a while. When I haven’t been getting any sleep at all.”

He looked at her sympathetically. “Have you tried hot milk and honey?”

She laughed again. “I’ve tried it all. Don’t worry, I’m okay. I’m used to it and I’ve learned to cope.”

“Me too.”

“Yeah, you too.”

They fell silent for a few seconds during which Ben, embarrassed, stared at his shoes. Which were a brown pair of Ecco’s and badly in need of a polish.

“Look Ben,” Moira said, “don’t worry. I’m not going to ask you out again. But if you want to ask me, go ahead. I’ll say yes.”

“I don’t know if I’ll be able to do that, Moira. I’m sorry. I’m just not made that way. There’s just not much left to me.” Quite unlike himself, he was fumbling for words. “Just my cases. It seems that they’re the only company I can tolerate. I can’t even listen to the news any more. It just drives me insane. London, Madrid, the Towers. So it’s just me and my stiffs. Without me they’d be all alone in the world.”

“And vice-versa?”

Ben didn't reply.

“And then you solve the case and they can rest in peace?”

“Something like that.”

“Rest in peace,” Moira said reflectively. “That's what we all want to do, isn't it?”

“I hope not.”

“But you never rest peacefully, do you?”

“Never.”

“Why don't we go see a movie, Ben, forget our troubles. I hear there's a good one out, about penquins.”

“Penquins,” he chuckled.

“Yes, it's supposed to be good. A good date movie is what I hear.”

“Is that what we should have Moira, a date?”

“Yes.”

He shook his head incredulously. “Do you know how long it's been since I've had a date?”

“Yes I do. With me. At the Barking Crab.”

Ben flashed a look of surprise at her when he realized she was right. Then he said, “there's really not much left to me Moira. Believe me, I think you'd be pretty disappointed.”

“I had a good time on our first date.”

“Our first date. Our only date. Look, I'll try. But I can't promise. It'll have to wait till this case is closed.”

“We could close it right now. Declare Stringbean the winner and be done with it. Go to the movies and see the penquins, take a walk, drink some wine. Trade some insomnia stories.”

“Like war stories, aren’t they.”

“I don’t know, I’ve never been to war.”

“I have. Trust me, it’s not as different as you might think. Battling for each hour.”

“Okay, Ben, I trust you.”

“Thanks Moira.”

She was as tall as Fern was short, as straightforward as Fern was twisted, as unathletic as Fern was an ironwoman. He liked her. And he realized that he had for years. Ben wanted to say something, but he didn’t have a clue what it was, so he looked at his shoes again. But during that brief moment when they were in his view he remembered how disappointed Miriam had been with him when he missed dinner with her and the boys for two weeks straight twenty years ago. She didn’t get angry, just sadly perplexed that her man could forgo the true pleasure of having a family. When Ben recalled her intelligent and convincing voice as it explained to him how foolish he was being, he was overcome by a desire to leave the building. So he barked a “good-bye” and made a bee-line for the exit.

## II.3

When he returned to the station, his mind a blank, Ben went straight to Chloë's office. She was peering into her screen and he interrupted her.

"Hey there old girl."

The tiny woman didn't move an inch and barked right back, "Fuck you, I'm not old."

"Got a present for you. A license to hack."

"Show me."

"It's on its way. Good for 24 hours. That's it. And not a word to anyone."

"I can probe to my heart's content?"

"Yup."

"Oh goodie. Epochal Pharmaceuticals here I come, right?"

"Yup."

"Any bad guys lurking on the payroll?"

"Yup. Best of all would be someone with a connection to our suspect: Winfred Bennett. Maybe a kid who went to McKinley High School in Dorchester. Something like that."

"Mister Big, what exactly are you thinking?" she said as she turned to look at him.

"Thinking that Bennett pulled the trigger, but that he was working for one Michael Degner, chief honcho at Epochal. Who had a lot to gain by grabbing Brian's computer and bumping him off."

“So tell me, Señor Bullshit, you don’t happen to have an actual reason to suspect this, do you?”

“No.”

“Just a hunch?”

“Yup.”

“Big Man, you’re my kind of guy.” And for the first time in Ben’s memory, Chloë smiled.

Neal was still busy peering into his own screen, so Ben let the youngster alone. He preferred his detective work to be in the flesh. And he knew which way to turn next: to Bernie Olen. Ben called Casper to see if the muscle-man had made it to work. He hadn’t, which meant he was still at home in the South End. When Ben called him, and asked if he could come visit, Bernie reluctantly said yes.

Bernie was fully dressed this time. Bulked up by useless gym-grown muscles, he was wearing tight black jeans, and a tight black sleeveless shirt. He wasn’t nearly as shell-shocked as he had been yesterday, but there was a palpable sadness around him.

“Thanks for seeing me Mr. Olen.”

“It’s okay, Detective. I’m sorry that I wasn’t very cooperative yesterday. I was very upset.”

“For good reason. Brian was your lab partner and friend.”

Bernie looked sheepish and stared at the floor. When he looked up he said, “I feel better today. I took a couple of Ambiens last night, so I had a good night’s sleep.”



Ben decided to provoke him. “Why did you want to sleep through the night? I mean, don’t you think it would be better for you just to face your pain straight on? You’re grieving, right? Shouldn’t you just admit that and take it straight? Wouldn’t that be a more honest response to your loss?”

Bernie smiled sadly. “Don’t be silly Detective. Why put up with pain when you don’t have to? Pain’s bad. I had enough pain yesterday to last a lifetime. Brian was my friend, but I have to get on with my life, don’t I, and the first step towards achieving that goal is to sleep at night. So, no, I’m not going to apologize for taking a med.”

“You don’t think it’s a little bit cowardly?”

“Cowardly?” Bernie looked amused, not angry. “Who knows. Maybe I am a coward. But the pain yesterday was off the charts, and believe me I just couldn’t take it again today. The pain was washing over me in waves and I was drowning in it. I couldn’t even drag myself to the gym, and that’s unusual. And when I went to bed my whole body began to shake. The Ambien did pretty good work for me last night. I could almost feel my GABA transmitters going to work. They were massaging my central nervous system in the nicest way. Ambien isn’t bad at all. It has a short half-life, which means that it’s out of the system quickly so you don’t feel hungover the next day. It’s the first day of the rest of my life, and I can handle it.”

“But Sweet Dreams is going to be better than Ambien, isn’t it.”

“You know about Sweet Dreams?” Bernie nearly gasped.

“Casper told me.”

“Sweet Dreams was the coolest idea ever,” Bernie said reluctantly. “Brian was cooking up ways of cleaning it up so that it could manage chronic insomnia. And then

there was the serotonin uptake inhibitor he thought he could pump into it. Most scientists would think his research was absolutely insane, but Brian was gunning for the whole package. Sleeping and dreaming without anxiety. If it worked, it would have been off the charts.”

“But with Brian gone, we’ll never know if it would have worked, will we?”

“No,” Bernie said sadly. “He was the brains behind the operation. I can’t push it any further without him. But the idea was certifiably crazy, so it probably wouldn’t have worked anyway.” Bernie smiled affectionately. “It was a crazy big gamble. But that’s what science is all about, isn’t it? Having hunches, taking chances, pursuing dreams.”

“Especially sweet ones.”

“Yes.”

Ben paused for a moment to wonder what would sort of dream would be sweet for him. Maybe shooting free throws with one of his sons. Of course, free throw shooting was only one of several basketball skill he had never fully mastered. In fact, the only thing he had ever been half-way good at was rebounding, and that wasn’t something he could have shared with his kids. Even if they had wanted to play with him. “What gym do you belong to?” Ben asked abruptly.

Bernie didn’t miss a beat. “One here in the South End called WellBeing. And Elpigen has privileges at the gym at the Stata Center over at MIT. So I work out there quite often. If I don’t lift five or six times a week, I don’t feel like myself. And I need to get back to feeling like myself.”

“Who is yourself?”

“Myself?”

“Yes. Who are you, what are you, just a bunch of chemicals circulating in your brain?”

“Yes, that’s about right. You’re trying to trick with me with these silly questions aren’t you Detective?” Bernie smiled nervously.

“No. Just trying to figure out what it means to you when you say you were pals with Brian. Was he just a bunch of circulating chemicals too? And is that what your friendship was? Two clusters of molecules latching on to one another? Or was there more to it than that?”

“More? What more is there? You’re sweet, Detective.”

“So I’ve been told. What about friendship?”

“Yes, Brian and I were,” he hesitated, “friends.” Bernie looked at Ben sympathetically. “You sound like my grandmother, Detective. And she’s dead.”

“That’s not surprising.”

“That she’s dead?”

“That I sound like her.”

Bernie chuckled unhappily. “Look, Detective, I want to help you find Brian’s killer. I really do.”

“Okay. Then help me find the missing hour.”

“What missing hour?”

“You said that you and he separated around 9:00. It’s a 10 minute walk to his apartment from here. But he was killed some time between 10 and 11.”

Bernie fell silent.

“Bernie, we need the truth. For Brian’s sake.”

“The truth?”

“That’s what I want, yes.”

“But you won’t tell anybody? It has to stay between you and me.”

“I can’t promise you that. This is a murder investigation, not a private chat. I need all the information I can get. We have to be frank with each other.”

Bernie got up and stretched. And then, to Ben’s surprise, he dropped to the floor and began doing pushups. Ben lost count at 30. When he was done he stood up, his face flushed, and said, “There now! So, where were we?”

“I was telling you that I can’t promise to keep the information you give me confidential.”

“Oh yes.”

“Please, Bernie, if you really cared about Brian, you have to tell me everything that happened, everything that you know. It’s the only way I’ll be able to find his killer.”

“Cared about him? Of course I cared about him. I loved him.” And with that remark Bernie began to weep lightly, his powerful, recently exercised, shoulders heaving out of proportion with the small sniffles and few tears.

The light-bulb, so familiar, so welcome, went off over Ben’s head.

“It’s okay Bernie. The truth is more important than what people think. Brian was your lover, wasn’t he?”

Bernie just stared at him for a few seconds, and then said in a small voice, “yes.”

“And that’s the missing hour, isn’t it? He was here in your apartment from 9 till 10, wasn’t he?”

“Yes,” Bernie grudgingly admitted.

“And he left just before 10, didn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“And what were you doing?”

“You’ve figured everything out by yourself. So what do you think we were doing?”

“How long had you been seeing each other?”

“Seeing each other? Gay men don’t see each other. They touch each other. And they do that where no one can see.”

“I wouldn’t have guessed that Brian was gay,” Ben said, although as the information sank in it began to make sense, especially of the strange look on his face in his wedding photo.

“Really?” Bernie said with contempt. “You think we give out special vibes that smart guys like you can pick up with your Gaydar? You’re sweet but what an ass you are. Yes, Brian was gay. Reluctant, but gay. I was his first real boyfriend. He had had impulses and the occasional touch and feel before, but he hadn’t wanted to admit it to himself. But he was gay, deep down gay.”

“How long have you two been...touching?”

“A while. One night, a couple of summers ago, we worked really late. I invited Brian in for a drink, and his shoulders were tight as coiled springs. I massaged them for him, and one thing led to another. He didn’t want to go home that night. Which wasn’t unusual. He didn’t get along with his wife too well, you know.”

“I didn’t know. But she hasn’t seemed terribly upset by his murder.”

“She’s probably glad he’s gone. She was always on Brian’s case, badmouthing our research, complaining that he came home too late from the shop, even though she wasn’t nice to him when he was home. She used to say that he made too much money for inventing drugs that would help rich people get to sleep. She didn’t have any problem sleeping, so she didn’t think anyone else should. But they do, and Brian and I were trying to help. She was tough on him.”

“Any idea why?”

“Not really. Except that she had a rough childhood. She didn’t talk about it much, and neither did Brian. But he did tell me one story.”

*As usual, it was a beautiful day, 70 degrees and sunny, in Hermosa Beach. Most of the time Fern Tarkanian didn’t notice the fine weather, which for her, as for most California natives, was taken for granted as part of the landscape of everyday life. But today was different. To everyone’s amazement, including her own, she had won the race and had become the league champion in the girls’ half-mile. She had been trailing going into the final 50 yards, and although her kick was not the strongest part of her race, she had felt full at the end, light on her feet, and her head unusually clear. The girl on her left, a tall, black girl, was driving hard to the finish, and when she flew by, Fern had felt a rush of fury. She felt violated, for she believed the race belonged to her. She shifted gears, pumped her arms hard the way she had been taught her, lifted her knees, kept the black girl in her sights. She repeated the stupid refrain her coach, a thick man named Boswell, loved to recite: “refuse to lose, refuse to lose, refuse to lose.” With these words echoing in her head, she charged forward, drawing on resources she didn’t know she*

*had. Shorter than her opponent, she needed a stride and a half to match the black girl's one. So she churned her legs harder and faster, felt her heart pound madly against her rib-cage and her lungs burn and her head get lighter and lighter, but still she kept her focus on the finish line. She caught the girl with a few yards left in the race, and when she broke the tape she collapsed.*

*When she regained consciousness, Coach Boswell was crouched over her, as were half a dozen of her teammates. They were looking at her solicitously and, for the first time, instead of seeing them as either indifferent or as threats, she saw care on their faces, and this only added to the complete confusion she felt.*

*"Stay down, Fern," Coach Boswell said.*

*"I'm okay Coach, really I am. I can get up."*

*The coach made her lie still for a couple of minutes, and then he helped her stand. As soon as she did so Fern became dizzy and had to be propped up by the two girls hovering over her. But she regained her balance quickly, and the dizziness passed. She took a few tentative steps, which were successful, and soon almost all of the girls were patting her on the shoulders, or rubbing her head, congratulating her, thanking her. Fern's victory had won them the league championship.*

*For the first time all season, for the first time ever, she had dawdled in the lockerroom after she had showered and dressed. To her amazement, she enjoyed the giddy play of her teammates. They had won the league championship, and Fern's victory in the half-mile had been decisive. She even laughed when the girls made their standard Boswell jokes, imitating his absurd refrain, "refuse to lose!" She almost felt part of it, but the feeling was too strange to really be hers. Still, she had lingered, sitting on a bench,*

*soaking in the gladness. But one element of her routine remained unchanged: she walked home from school alone.*

*And so it was that on this one day she felt grateful for the warmth of the sun, so much so that for a brief moment she broke into a skip. But she caught herself when she imagined what awaited her at home.*

*When she walked through the doors of her small bungalow, her parents and younger brother were already sitting at the kitchen table eating dinner. Her father, wearing a starched white shirt, her mother a shapeless dress, her brother blue jeans and a Lakers tee-shirt, all looked up from the meal when she entered. She father dead-eyed, but with a glint of rage, said to her, “you’re late.”*

*“I’m sorry Poppa. But I won. I won the race! I nearly fainted afterwards so I had to rest a little bit. And then my teammates wanted to celebrate. We won the league championship, Poppa!” When she saw his face unmoved by her announcement, she retreated. “I’m sorry, Poppa. I stayed at the school with my teammates for just a little while. And then I came straight home.”*

*“You’re late!” her father exploded. “You never come late again! Go with me,” he said.*

*Her mother’s shoulders clutched with pain, but when Fern tried to catch her eye, her mother turned down to look steadfastly at her plate. Her brother too was staring into his plate.*

*Her father led her into the den, which was the standard place for the beatings. Fern, a straight A student, a track star, an obedient little girl, and so very beautiful, was beaten regularly by her father. For no good reason.*



“Sounds awfully rough,” Ben said.

“Oh please, Detective! We all had it rough, didn’t we? That’s no excuse for behaving like such a bitch!”

“Maybe not,” Ben agreed.

Bernie’s eyes squeezed themselves tightly shut and he fell silent. When they opened he immediately dropped back down to the floor and did another ten push-ups.

“She wasn’t nice to him, wasn’t nice to my sweet boy. Anyway, he was in no rush to go home that night. He always tried to be at home in the morning, to have breakfast with his girls, but that was about it. So he stayed here until 10 and then he called her. That was a mistake: he woke her up and she got mad.”

On a whim Ben asked, “Do you have trouble sleeping at night Bernie?”

Bernie looked puzzled at this abrupt turn in the conversation. Then he smiled. “You’ve seen the way I work. When in doubt pop a pill.” The muscle-man smiled weakly.

“What about Brian?”

“No problems at all for that boy. But that’s because he didn’t need sleep. Sometimes, he’d stay here all night, and then go home just before dawn. But even when he’d had only a couple of hours of sleep he’d be fine all day at the shop. I don’t know how he did it. He was a monster in his own way, Brian was. Tough as nails. If only he had worked out.”

“Did Fern know about you two?”

“Oh God no! And don’t you dare tell her!”

“So why did Brian stay with her?”

“I told you already: he didn’t want to abandon his daughters. And he was afraid of upsetting his parents. He didn’t want shock waves or to be noticed. He seemed to like the idea of having a family. I don’t know why, really, because that’s not quite the same thing as liking the family, but he thought it was close enough. It’s sad, isn’t it? Brian was only himself at work. And with me afterwards. Everywhere else he was faking it, outside of himself, cold and distant. Only I could warm him up. Brian was changing, though, he was coming around. He would have left Fern eventually, I’m sure of it. And then we could have spent weekends together in Provincetown.”

“Did you want him to leave Fern?”

Bernie seemed to be taking the question seriously, as if he didn’t really know the answer. “Well,” he said slowly, “the weekends certainly would have been nice. But, still our relationship was fine the way it was. We had our routine: work, dinner, my place. It wasn’t too bad. I like living alone, you know. That way I can go to the gym whenever I feel like it.”

Bernie looked at Bernie and hoped that the muscle-man wasn’t about to do any more push-ups.

“Brian and I worked so well together,” Bernie continued. “The sex just made it better. We understood each other’s moves. In bed and in the lab.”

“So back to Tuesday night. Brian called Fern and then left your place around 10.”

“Yes.”

“What’d he say to her.”

“That he’d be home soon. I think she hung up on him. We made a stupid joke about her bad manners. He said he was used to it.”

“And that’s the last you saw of him.”

“Yes, yes, the very last.” Bernie started to weep again. “He was such a sweet boy, and he was making such progress. I almost had him convinced to go to the gym, to tighten himself up a little bit. He would have started lifting soon, I know he would have, if only I could have stayed on his case. And then finally he would have left Fern. But he’s gone now.”

“Yes, he’s gone, Bernie, gone forever. But his memory is with us, it’s in us. In you and me. And so we have to do right by him. We care about him and we’re responsible for him. And so you have to tell me everything from now on and not hold back a thing. We have to work together to put together the story, figure out who did this terrible thing to him. We owe it to Brian.”

“I won’t hold back from you anymore, Detective. But don’t tell Fern, okay?”

“Why? You don’t have to deal with her anymore, and you’re out of the closet. What’s the worry?”

Bernie paused and stared thoughtfully at the wall. “It’s going to make him look bad. Poor baby will look bad.”

“Maybe. But better he should look bad than his murder go unsolved.”

Bernie’s face hardened with resolve. “You’re right.”

“That’s good Bernie.” He fell silent to give the muscle-man a chance to recuperate. Then he asked, “did Brian have his computer with him that night?”

“His computer?” Bernie looked confused.

“His laptop?”

“I don’t know. I guess he did. He always took it home with him at night. He kept it in his backpack.”

“Are you sure he had it on Tuesday night?”

“Sure? No. I didn’t actually look inside the pack. But I assume he did.”

“And when he left your apartment he had his pack with him?”

“Let me think. Yes. Yes, he did.”

“Anything on that computer have to do with Brian’s work?”

“Probably not. We have big machines in the office. But some of the little stuff could have been on his laptop, I guess.”

“Stuff that had to do with Sweet Dreams?”

“Probably not. But maybe. I don’t know.” Bernie paused and stretched his arms over his head. “But, yes, I suppose that something might have been on it.”

“Anything that could have benefited someone else?”

“Like who?”

“Like your competition. Brian have anything on his computer like, I don’t know, like a trade secret or something? Something that someone else would love to see.”

Realizing Ben’s line of reasoning, Bernie froze in thought, and then said, “the molecule. If he had that on his machine it might have been interesting to someone. It’s not patented yet. Best of all would have been the E.S.M.R..”

“What’s that?”

“Efficient synthetic manufacturing route. Big problem in our business isn’t always getting the molecule but figuring out how to scale up the quantity. Make it in big, big batches. We were nowhere near that yet, at least I didn’t think we were.”

“What do you mean? Did Brian keep secrets from you?”

“No, not really. But his mind was so quick that you could never quite tell what he was up to. He was usually three steps ahead of the rest of us.”

“So, if that stuff was on the computer, it would be valuable to someone.”

“Yes, that’s it!” Bernie said, as if the lightbulb had gone on over his head. “Hard to imagine, but not impossible.”

“Okay. Thanks. One last question.” Ben paused, fearing that the connection he had in mind would be too obvious. He decided to go forward anyway. “Did Brian have any trouble with Michael Degner?”

“Degner?” Bernie’s face contorted, at first in distaste and then in astonishment. “You think he had something to do with this?”

“I don’t think anything yet, Bernie.”

“Well Degner is a homophobic prick! He wanted Brian of course, but Brian liked working with me and Casper. Casper’s a total sweetie. Wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

“I got that impression. Had Degner been pressuring Brian?”

“Not recently. But a year ago he was calling pretty often. Took both of us out to dinner a couple of times; to the Green Room, the fancy restaurant near his shop. He tried to sell us on Epochal. We weren’t interested. He was so damned pushy. He’s the dark side of our business. Cares only about the bottom line. Very pushy. Guess that’s why he’s so damned successful.”

“But he couldn’t push you around?”

“No. But he tried. Once, back in California, he did something crazy. He wanted me to work for him. I told him I wasn’t interested but he wouldn’t take no for an answer.

So he made me come to his house one night. His big fancy house. A limo picked me up after work and took me there. And you know what? After I told him that I wouldn't sign up with him, he showed me his gun collection! He had a glass-case full of them! He unlocked it and then took one out. Fondled it like a toy. He pointed it at me."

"At you?"

"No, not really at me. But in my general direction. And then he pulled the trigger. It made a sharp click. Sounded monstrous! I was scared but I wasn't going to let that prick bully me. And I wasn't going to let him bully Brian either. I told Brian never to go with him to his house here in Boston. But his little trick wouldn't have worked with Brian, either. In his own way Brian was tough. Goes with the flow, but he won't let you push him around. Finally Degner got the message. Gave up on both of us."

"Do you think he knew about Sweet Dreams?"

"Probably. That man seems to know everything that goes on in the Square. You really think that he had something to do with this, that he took Brian's computer?" Bernie stared at Ben hopefully.

"No, not really. I'm just playing with ideas, trying to fill out the details, get a bigger picture of what Brian's world was like."

"Oh," Bernie said, "very competitive. It was a race, really. Whoever gets the next big sleep med to the market is going to make a fortune. And if Brian was right, then Sweet Dreams would have left everyone else in the dust. Manages chronic, low on the sides, and pops serotonin levels way up. Which Brian, and almost nobody else, thought would max out the dreams. People would wake up so, so refreshed."

“Sounds a little scary, doesn’t it Bernie? Perfectly programmed sleep. Whatever happened to good old fashioned human struggle?”

“There you go again. You sound like Fern. But I know you’re not a bitch.”

“Thank you.”

“No, you’re just an old sweetie who wants to find Brian’s killer.”

“Yup,” Ben said with some resignation, “that’s me

## II.4

Ben was feeling something that vaguely resembled happiness as he was smoking his cigarette on the bench in the small park across the street from Bernie's condo in the South End. The nicotine had gone straight to his brain, whose narrative neurons were now firing like mad. Brian and Bernie had been lovers, a twist Ben had not foreseen. His own ignorance excited him. If he could be surprised about this, if the plot could turn so unexpectedly towards a gay romance, there was no predicting where it might go next, and this meant that there was good work to be done. And Ben knew he was the man to do it, for he felt the looming presence of a beginning, middle and end to Brian Mortensen's sad tale. This gladdened him, even though he couldn't yet see how his new discovery would figure into his final product. All he knew was that Brian and Bernie had been lovers, which meant that Brian kept secrets. And secret lives promised plot twists, one of which might lead him to the killer. But how? Had Brian gone to gay bars? Was he killed by a male prostitute? No. Ben didn't yet know nearly enough.

He stamped his cigarette out and looked around for a trash bin. He couldn't find one, so with a stab of regret he barely noticed, he dropped his stub onto the sidewalk. As soon as he did a bum ambled up to him. A white guy, maybe 50, his face was ravaged by drugs and homelessness, his pants were tattered and he smelled bad. But his blue eyes were close to beautiful.

"They should have ashtrays out here."

"Yup."



“And hey listen. Guy’s stalking me. I went to the cops. They’ll charge me 15 bucks to file a stalking complaint.”

“Really?” Ben asked.

“Yeah. I ain’t got that kind of money. Guy’s been following me for 10 years. Always in the same places I am. He’s devious. A manipulator. Takes money from old women. The cops won’t do a damn thing.”

“You can file a restraining order.”

“I’ll restrain him myself. He don’t want to mess with me. I got nothing to lose.”

“Yes you do. They’ll throw you in jail. You don’t want them to do that, do you?”

“He’s a manipulator. I want him audited. Find out every penny he’s made.”

“Cops can’t do anything till he does something illegal.”

“Well, I ain’t gonna wait around. Told the cops they might get a body back.”

“Hope you don’t do anything like that.”

“If I had some money I wouldn’t have to do that.”

“Learn how to ignore the guy is my advice. If he’s been bugging you for that long without harming you, he probably won’t ever do anything.”

“He’d better not. I got nothing to lose. He does. He’s got some money, a cell phone. He takes money from old ladies. Gets 200 dollars for raking some old lady’s yard. She don’t have that kind of money. He’s a manipulator. I want to get him audited.”

“People like him make life shit.”

“Shit’s right. But I got nothing to lose. He does.”

“Gotta go,” Ben said as he handed the guy a ten-dollar bill. “Good luck with the audit.”

“Thanks, thanks a lot.”

Back at the station, there was another yellow stickie on his desk: “Got something. C.” He immediately went to her office. When she saw him, the little woman looked triumphant.

“Damn Chloë, you’re a miracle worker.”

“It was nothing, Chief. All I do is push the buttons.”

“Yeah, but unlike me you know what buttons to push. Anyway, spill the beans.”

“Ah, the beans,” she said, but didn’t continue. Ben knew he shouldn’t rush her. Chloë got up from her chair and waddled over to her refrigerator. She opened it and pulled out a Diet Coke. She popped the tab, and took a long swig. “Delicious. Want one?”

“No thank you. It’s too early for me.”

“Never too early for love, big man.”

“Got it.”

She took another long drink, and then sat back down on her chair. “Here’s the deal. After I got the warrant, it took me about 15 minutes to get into the Epochal files. Copied their personnel records and cross-checked. Naturally didn’t find anybody interesting on their regular staff. So figured I should look at who they contracted for cleaning, janitorial, and the like. Get this: they use a company called ‘Spotless Technologies.’ Hires mostly illegals, of course, but also a few locals. And one of them has a nice little record, and best of all, he probably knows your Winfred Bennet. His name is Dennis Williams, aka Blinky. Went to McKinley High School and played

basketball in 1998-99. Same year as your boy. Busted twice for selling weed. Sometimes works the night shift over at Epochal, mopping floors.”

“You found out all this in the last two hours?”

“Big Man! You think it took me two whole hours to find this out? You’re a bigger dope than I thought.”

“Damn Chloë,” Ben said in genuine admiration, “you’re a miracle worker.”

“Bet your ass. This two-bit joint would go down the tubes without me.”

“I hear you. Dennis ‘Blinky’ Williams it is.”

Ben walked quickly, his heart rate accelerating, to his partner’s desk. As usual, Neal was staring into the computer screen, which Ben caught sight of. On it was a picture of Fern Mortensen, but Ben didn’t have the patience to ask why. Instead he surprised Neal by blurting out, “A kid named Blinky Williams!” Then he had to pause for a few seconds to catch his breath.

“Really?” Neal dead-panned, after he had closed the page that had been on his screen. “Tell me when I’m supposed to care.”

“Right now. He works as a janitor for Epochal. Has a record. And get this, he went to school with your pal Stringbean.”

“Blinky?”

“That’s his street name. Real name is Dennis Williams.”

“Interesting. What’s your line?”

“Degner finds out that Williams has a record, and so he gets friendly with him. He asks him if he knows any bad guys. Williams does and becomes the go-between, the

talent agent. Degner feeds Williams the money who turns it over to Stringbean, who does the evil deed. Plugs Brian, gives Degner the computer.”

“But Stringbean didn’t have any money when we collared him.”

“So what? He already spent it.”

“So what do we do next?”

“Find Blinky.”

“All right. Let’s pay a quick visit to Blinky.”

“He works night shift. Ten to six.”

“So did he work two nights ago?”

“Let’s find out.”

Neal went back to his screen to find the number for Spotless Technologies, and then flipped open his phone to call. It turned out that the kid had arrived late for work: 11:15. There was hope for this story line, and so the two detectives went back to the street to find a man named Dennis Williams. Which wasn’t hard. All they had to do was give Willie McGee a call. It was early afternoon, and he was still in bed when Neal called him. But his spirits were good.

“Detective Simpson! It’s a fine pleasure to be speaking with you.”

“Willie, we got a name for you.”

“My usual fee?”

“Of course.”

“All right then, let her rip.”

“Dennis Williams. Street name Blinky.”

“Blinky Williams. Boy’s a stupid motherfucker. Excuse my French. I mean, he’s a little bit on the challenged side, if you know what I mean. Works as a janitor, sweeping floors. I’m going be selling me some floors soon, Detective. Any chance you been thinking of relocating? Just give me a few more months and I can find you a nice condo in the South End. Plenty of black folk around, so you won’t be lonely or hurting for excitement. But the neighborhood’ll be nice, too. Lotta white people around.”

“Back to business, Willie. What can you tell me about Blinky?”

“He’s alright. Spent a year or two in the slam for selling, and then hit the straight and narrow. Usually comes and has a drink at Ruben’s before he goes to work.”

“He with you two nights ago?”

“The night that white boy was shot?”

“Yes, that night.”

“Let me think. He was, matter of fact. I remember because when Stringbean arrived, Blinky gave him a little hug. They went to school together.”

“Blinky had been there for a while before Stringbean arrived?”

“Yeah, same as me. I got there about 9:30, I told you that. Blink was there.”

“Did he and Stringbean talk? They look like they had something important to say to each other?”

“Nah, them boys didn’t barely talk. Their hug was per, per,” Willie hesitated.

Neal helped him out: “perfunctory?”

“That’s it! Distant. Like they didn’t give a shit but were doing it anyway just because they was supposed to. When you gonna pay me for this information?”

“Soon, Mr. McGee, soon.”

“Don’t bail on me, Detective. I’ve got bills to pay.”

“Don’t worry, Willie.”

“Willie puts Blinky Williams at Rubens during the shooting,” Neal told Ben as they were drinking their coffee.

“Excellent. Let’s go find young Mr. Williams and ask a few questions. And I’ve got a treat for you, partner.”

“What’s that?” Neal asked

“Plot twist. I found the missing hour.”

“Where?”

“Bernie Olen’s apartment.”

“What do you mean?”

“That’s where Brian was between 9 and 10.”

“Why?”

“Why do you think?”

Neal looked stumped, so Ben came to his assistance. “Carnal pleasure.”

“What?”

“Between the sheets.”

“Damn. Brian was gay?”

“He was starting to come out. Bernie was his tutor.”

“Damn.”

“I was surprised too.”

“What about his marriage?”

“To the lovely Fern.”

“The lovely Fern,” Neal echoed reluctantly.

“It was a sham. Brian needed cover. His home-life wasn’t roses.”

“Damn. Maybe Degner knew something about this, and saw an opening.”

“Opening for what?”

“I don’t know. To get Fern back. Offer her a sympathetic shoulder to cry on. A straight shoulder.”

“Maybe.”

“Or maybe Degner was blackmailing Brian. Trying to force him to work for Epochal or he would blow his cover. Spill the beans about his relationship with Bernie. Brian refuses, Degner gets frustrated.”

“Why didn’t he just blow the whistle, if that’s what he threatened to do?”

“Maybe he just got so mad that he lost his cool.”

“Doesn’t seem like our boy Degner blows his cool too often.”

“No, it doesn’t. But check this out. Our boy likes to play with guns.”

“Say what?”

“Bernie told me that Degner collects guns.”

“No shit?”

“Not a bit. At least not if Bernie is being straight with me.”

Neal smiled.

When the two detectives left the station, they were greeted by a flash of lightning and a few seconds later a crash of thunder. They ran to the car and just as they closed the doors it started to pour. For a few moments the torrential rain was horizontal and blinding. The building across the street looked like a waterfall. But it was a typical Boston thunderstorm, in its own way enjoyable and promising of some relief from the humidity, and it ended within minutes. When it did, Neal started the car and drove through the puddles towards Blinky Williams' apartment. The kid lived in a run-down building near Franklin Park. Their first few knocks produced no results, but they kept at it relentlessly until a eye-ball peered through the peep hole of the door and a crackling voice said, "yeah, what you want?"

"Mr. Williams? It's the police. We have a few questions to ask you."

"All right," the eye-ball said passively.

The door was opened by a tall and thick young man whose muscles were going slack. Wearing only boxer shorts and a tee-shirt, his head bowed as if he were looking for a lost object on the floor, Blinky didn't seem to know what to do or say.

"May we come in, Mr. Williams? We just want to ask you some questions."

At first Blinky looked him uncomprehendingly. Then he said, "Yeah, I guess so."

The tiny apartment was immaculate. The furniture was plastic cheap, but arranged with some care. There were nearly a dozen potted plants spaced evenly around the window-sills.

"Nice place you got here," Ben said. "You must have a green-thumb: your plants are doing well."

"Yeah."



“You mind if we ask you some questions?” Ben continued.

“What kind of questions?”

“Questions relating to a crime.”

“What kind of crime.”

“You work over at Epochal Pharmaceuticals?”

“Who?” he asked, genuinely puzzled.

“Big place over in Kendall Square. In Cambridge. You work at night, over there, don’t you?”

“Oh yeah, that’s where my boss been telling me to go. I work night shift. Cleaning up.”

“You work for Spotless Technologies?”

“Yeah.”

“Your boss said you came in late two nights ago. Where were you?”

“What?”

“Where were you at 10 p.m. on Wednesday night?”

Blinky stopped to think. “Drinking a little bit over at Ruben’s. I got in late. Sorry about that.”

“That’s okay. You know a guy named Stringbean Bennett?”

“Stringbean? Course I know him. I played ball with him in high-school.”

“Did he know you worked at Epochal?”

“Where?”

“Epochal Pharmaceuticals? You know, the big place, where you clean floors at night?”

“Nah, he didn’t know that. He knew I worked at night, that’s about it.”

“You never told him anything about the place?”

“Nah. I don’t know nothing about that place myself.”

“You know the boss there, Michael Degner?”

“Who?”

“Big tall white guy?”

“I don’t know nobody there.”

Ben brought his full six-four in front of Dennis Williams. “Be honest with me now Blinky. I know you talked to somebody over there.”

Blinky blinked but then he toughened up. “I don’t know nobody. No shit. I don’t talk nobody there. Except Carlos. He tells me what floors to mop. That’s all I do. Never talked to nobody there. I ain’t lying to you.”

Ben knew he was telling the truth, and his heart sank. He walked away from Blinky. “So what can you tell me about Winfred Bennett?”

“Stringbean? He’s all right.”

“You guys been staying in touch after high-school much?”

“See him on the streets once in a while. Over at Rubens.”

“That’s it?”

“Yeah, man, that’s it. I didn’t hang with him or nothing.”

“Why not?”

“He’s all right, but he ain’t nothing to me,” said Blinky, who by now was sounding skittish.

Ben and Neal took turns asking Blinky Williams questions, until both became convinced they had uncovered nothing but a deadend. The kid had nothing to do with Michael Degner. But he did know Stringbean, so Ben pressed him, hoping at least to get a story, to fill out the picture of the tall, skinny kid in jail. He got one.

*Coach Doyle blew the whistle loud and sharp. "Timeout!" he said, his voice irritated, but under control. "Okay fellas, have a seat."*

*The players, tired, sweating, moving slow, sat on the bleachers. "Look, fellas, you're just not getting it done on D. You either fight through the pick or you gotta call for a switch. Stringbean, come on man, you didn't even try to get through the pick. You've got to do that, son. Don't just give up on the play."*

*"Sorry coach."*

*"No need to be sorry. Just do it right. Okay fellas. Let's call it a day. Stringbean, I need a word with you."*

*The tall skinny kid, who looked exhausted, hung his head sheepishly as he waited for all the other players to leave the court. When they had, the coach spoke to him.*

*"Look, Winfred, I'm not gonna beat around the bush with you. I heard you were dealing pot again in school. Is that true?"*

*String didn't respond.*

*"Son, we have to be straight with each other. Everything we do here, everything we're trying to accomplish, depends on that. I'm straight with you, and you've gotta be the same for me. If you're dealing pot, tell me."*

*"Just a little."*

*“Why, Winfred? Why are you doing that?”*

*“I need the money coach. I gotta take care of my sisters. You know that.”*

*“I do know that. But your grandmother’s working two jobs. And if you need money, this just isn’t the way. You get caught, you blow your chance for a scholarship. You’ve got what most people don’t...a chance, son, a good chance. Burlington’s gonna take you, with or without the SATs. You spend two years there, and it’s a lock you’ll get into Northern Iowa. That’s a good program. You’ll play against Iowa and Iowa State. Heck, you do well at Burlington, maybe you’ll even get a scholarship at one of those places. You can play Div One, Winfred, I know you can. Don’t blow it. Don’t make your grandmother sad.”*

*The boy was unable to look Coach Doyle in the eye, and he seemed unwilling to speak. But he managed to quietly mutter, “I won’t, coach, I promise.”*

*“I can get you a job at DeAngelo’s. It’s not much, but delivering pizza’s a world better than dealing pot. What do you say?”*

*Stringbean looked uncomfortable and didn’t answer for a moment, but then he came to life and blurted out, “I don’t want to deliver no pizza, Coach. People be laughing at me. Please Coach, don’t make me do that.”*

*Bobby softened. “Okay. But what if I can get you another job?”*

*“What kind of job?”*

*“I don’t know. But what if I find you something better than delivering pizza?”*

*“Yeah, I’ll take it. I’ll take anything. Just don’t want to deliver no pizza.”*

*“Okay, it’s deal. A job, but not pizza. And you’re promising me: no more pot?”*

*“Yeah, you got it Coach D.”*

*In the lockerroom Stringbean reunited with his teammates, Wallace, Avon, Little Man, Blinky, Weebay. They clustered around their star player.*

*“Yo man, what Coach D do to your ass?” Wallace asked.*

*“Nothing. The man’s my bitch. He didn’t do nothing. We was talking about defense, that’s all. Gotta play me more D, that’s all.”*

*“Yo String, can you bring some weed over my place tonight?” Blinky asked. “I’m running low.”*

*“You got cash?”*

*“Shit yeah, I got cash.”*

*“Then I’ll be over. Around midnight. I got other deliveries to make tonight. But you better be having that money ready, or I’m gonna fry your sorry ass. You hear?”*

*“Most definitely, String, mos def,” Blinky responded.*

## II.5

The two cops were sitting at a picnic table in the still magnificent Franklin Park. Designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, it deserved better treatment than it had received. Instead of being surrounded by grand apartment buildings, as was Olmsted's more famous creation, Central Park in Manhattan, Franklin was flanked by what had become decrepit tenements. Its stately ancient trees, under whose shade Ben and Neal were sitting, seemed out of place.

"All right, so now we know that Stringbean was no angel," Neal said, a touch of impatience in his voice. "Turns out he's a pretty good liar."

"Looks that way."

"Big deal. Blink's got no connection. So are we done now, Ben?"

"Maybe."

"If Blinky's clean then Degner's got no connection either."

"Or he did the job in some other way."

"You don't give up, do you? Which way?"

"Haven't figure that out yet."

"Right. So what's next?"

"A visit with String."

The detectives got into Neal's sweltering car, and drove in silence to the City Jail, located on an improbably impressive site on the Charles River. National Public Radio was still consumed by the London Bombings, and the droning of the somber voices only

seemed to add to the heat and the humidity, which even the brief thunderstorm had done little to diminish.

The tall skinny man looked ravaged. His eyes were blurry red, his hands couldn't stop fluttering. He was in withdrawal, and he had been up all night vomiting.

"I'm sick, man," was the first thing he said to the cops. "You gotta get me a doctor. I can't sleep, I can't stop shaking, I gotta get me something."

"We can get you a doctor, Winfred," Ben said resassuringly. "We can even get you some medication. Won't get you high, but it would make you feel better."

"You can do that?"

"Yes we can. But you have to give us something first."

"What can I give you? I ain't done nothing. I told you that. I ain't lying. I didn't kill nobody. I found the wallet and the gun and the cell phone just sitting on top of it like somebody wanted me to take it. I just picked it all up, threw the phone away, and put the wallet and the gun in my pack, and went over to Rubens. That's what I did. And they charged me with murder!"

"All right, then just answer a question."

"What question?" String's face was somewhere between suspicion and despair

"Have you ever talked to a man named Michael Degner?"

"Who?"

"He's a big-shot white man, a rich guy. He works in Kendall Square. In Cambridge."

"I never talked to no big-shot."

"Don't lie Stringbean. We can help you, but you have to tell us the truth."

“What truth?”

“The truth about that gun. Did you shoot it?”

“No,” he said sluggishly.

“You sure? If you’re lying, you’re going to go down really hard.”

“I’m sure.” Stringbean’s body was swamped by resignation.

“You didn’t do this crime for somebody? If you did, he’ll go down harder than you. That’s the only way you’re going to get a break on this; if you tell us who you were working for.”

“Working for? I ain’t working for nobody.” He looked wistful.

“So you never heard of Michael Degner. Very tall white guy. Works at a big pharmaceutical company in Cambridge?”

“Pharmaceutical? I could you use me one of them right now.”

The tall skinny man folded his arms across his chest, whether to stop himself from either shaking or talking Ben could not tell. Stringbeen failed on the first count but succeeded on the second, and the only thing he told the cops was that he wanted to see a doctor.

“What do you think, Ben?” Neal asked. They were drinking coffee at a Starbucks; Neal an iced-cappacino, Ben a double espresso with lots of sugar. Because the joint was air-conditioned, they were drinking it slow.

“Not sure. Blinky’s out of the picture; he had nothing to do with it. Which is a damn shame because that would have been a beauty. Maybe Degner hooked up with Stringbean through some other route.”



“And Stringbean’s keeping quiet about it? Doesn’t seem likely. He doesn’t have the moxie to clam up on someone else’s behalf. Even a someone whose father knew Hitler.”

Ben looked at his partner suspiciously. “The kid knows how to lie. You said that yourself.”

“True. So we’d better go one-on-one with Degner?”

“We’d better,” Ben replied.

“You gonna sweat him, Ben? He’s a tough cookie. And it still seems crazy to think he’d pull a trigger himself. He’s got his own empire, and Brian was just one scientist. He wasn’t that important.”

“Maybe he had the recipe for Sweet Dreams.”

“Yeah?”

“What if Degner wanted to stop Sweet Dreams, clear some space for his own product, and get Fern back, all in one shot. There’s elegance here, Neal, a double motive. One wouldn’t do. But two, two is delicious.”

“Delicious,” Neal shook his head incredulously. “And his father knew Hitler? What’s that? Icing on the cake?”

Ben didn’t respond for nearly a minute. “Why don’t you give the station a call. See if anything’s back on the gun we found.”

Neal looked at his partner affectionately, but didn’t move a muscle. Then he smiled and flipped open his phone. He stood up from the table and a few paces away before he started talking. While Neal was doing so, Ben closed his eyes, put his two

large hands behind his sweaty head, and allowed himself to feel the pain in his joints.

When Neal returned his eyes were on fire. “Guess what?” he asked.

“Surprise me, amigo” Ben replied wearily.

“Ballistics report came in. The .22 we found on String was the one that shot Brian Mortensen.”

“No surprise.”

“It gets better. Much better. For you anyway. The 22 was registered to Michael Degner. In California. A Smith & Wesson model 41, with an adjustable target sight and a wooden grip. But it was reported stolen in December 1998.”

Ben said nothing, but every muscle in his face tightened. “Guess he’s a suspect now.”

## II.6

The detectives got back into the blistering cauldron that was their car, and began the drive across the river to Kendall Square. Once again, the radio broadcast the grim news. Yes, the pundits asserted, the bombers were almost certainly home-grown. When he heard this Ben angrily switched the radio off.

“If London can grow them, why not Boston?” Ben asked.

“Yeah,” was Neal’s wary response. He had heard his partner’s we-should-kill-their-mothers speech after the Madrid bombings and didn’t want to trigger it again.

“Wish those bastards would at least pick the right targets,” Ben said.” Why shoot up a subway when you could do in a big pharma lab or a software shop.”

“You’re talking crazy. Like one of those...those....”

“Luddites?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, they weren’t exactly the craziest bastards on the block.”

“They weren’t?”

“They were just scared.”

“Of what?”

“Of what was coming down the pike. Early nineteenth century and the industrial revolution was picking up speed. Textile factories going up like mushrooms. These guys were skilled craftsmen and now they were being replaced by machines. They saw their whole world going up in smoke. So they did a bit of nighttime damage to the factories. ”

“Busting up someone else’s property, were they? Don’t civilized folk like ourselves call that a crime?”

“Yeah. But they knew what was coming, that’s all I’m saying. I’m not defending them.”

“Sounds to me like you are. You got this bug up your ass about progress, about technology. What do you want to do, go back to the nineteenth century and work on a loom? You want to make your own shoes, too? Remember this, my friend, my ancestors were slaves back then. So, shit yeah, I think there’s been progress. Here I am sitting in a car with a distinguished white police officer like yourself and I don’t even have to call you ‘boss.’ And I’m on a career path that’s only heading upwards. I got a house and a kid and a car of my very own. So, no, I don’t feel a whole lot of sympathy for your Luddite buddies.”

“They’re not my buddies. I told you I wasn’t defending them, just explaining. They weren’t wrong about what was coming down the pike. That’s all. There are no more cottage industries, like the ones they knew. Hell, there are no more cottages.”

“There’s cottage cheese, my friend, so don’t give up hope.”

Ben looked at his partner sympathetically and he almost smiled. “Cheese.”

“Cheese.”

“Okay, we’ll leave it at that.”

For the next few minutes the two detectives listened only to the hum of the barely competent air-conditioner. Then Neal asked, “should we call and make an appointment?”

“Nah, let’s interrupt him. See how he likes that.”

The boss wasn't in his office, the dazzling Asian receptionist with a frozen smile told them. He was down the hall in a conference room talking with a research team, and he couldn't be interrupted. "Madam," Ben said firmly, "that's not quite accurate." He moved a few steps closer to the young woman in order to make her feel the force of his height. "In fact, he can be interrupted and that is precisely what we intend to do."

For a few seconds he stared at the receptionist in silence. Then he said, "You tell your boss that the Boston Police are here and that we have to talk to him. You tell him it's important and that he has to leave his meeting right now or we'll be walking in on it." He paused to smile. "Would you do that, please?"

The woman wasn't the slightest bit intimidated, only annoyed. But she picked up the phone. She spoke to Degner and then told the detectives to go into the office. There they waited for twenty minutes. When Degner finally arrived he seemed cheerful and shook his each detective's hand vigorously.

Neal got the ball rolling. "A few more questions, if you don't mind Dr. Degner."

"Of course, Detective. Fire away."

"When exactly did you leave this building on Tuesday night?"

"Detective! I'm flattered! You've made me a suspect. Why? Don't you have a certain Winfred Bennett locked up already?"

"We need to touch all bases, get the complete picture, Doctor. That's our standard procedure and we're just doing our job."

"You're picture painters, are you?"

"Yes."

“Well, okay, I’ll play along. I left this building at 10.”

“What were you doing.”

“Reviewing PA’s right here in this office.”

“What’s a PA?”

“A protocol assessment. When an experiment is being conducted there’s a tremendous amount of reporting. It’s like a log. I don’t write them, but I have to review them. See what my people are up to. This is a big shop. It takes a lot to stay on top of it.”

“And so you stayed till 10. Did anyone see you leave?”

“Janitors, cleaning people were around then, but I don’t think I bumped into any of them. The lab and tech people were all gone by 8 or 9.”

“Can you give us the name of any janitor who might have seen you?”

“You’re joking, right?”

Neal didn’t respond, so Degner laughed. “Ask my secretary. I don’t hire those people, and I certainly never speak with them. Neither does she. They must be hired by the building management company, or something. I don’t know, and she probably won’t either. You can also ask Patty, if you’d like. She’s the receptionist. Cute, isn’t she?” He paused and nearly winked. “Anyway, most of the janitors here probably don’t speak English and the other half are probably stoned when they’re cleaning my floors. So I don’t imagine they notice much. I don’t think you’ll extract a great deal of information on that front.”

“Dr. Degner, you don’t have an alibi, you realize that?”

“I’m shaking in my boots Detective,” he chuckled.

“Maybe you should. Where’d you eat dinner that night?” Neal asked.

“Dinner?” Degner looked genuinely puzzled. “Had it delivered. Thai.”

“From what restaurant?”

“Oh good Christ, Detective, do you think I pay attention to those details? Ask my secretary. She’ll know the answer to that one.”

“Will do.”

Ben suddenly awoke from what had seemed to be a trance: “What sort of social life do you have Doctor?”

Degner looked surprised. “You mean lady friends?”

“That’s part of a social life, yes.”

“I have a few. All of them young. Some of them beautiful. None of them serious.”

“And what do you do with your lady friends?”

Degner laughed. “Besides fuck? Let’s see,” he pretended to be genuinely thinking. “Oh I remember! We talk. About meaningful topics.” And he laughed uproariously.

“Do you go anywhere?”

“Green Room. That’s the only place. Excellent food. Especially the halibut. Do you like fish, detective?”

“How often do you go to the Green Room?”

“A couple of times a week. I’m a busy man. Can’t afford to take too much time off from work. But I do have my needs. They’re moderate, but demand their due.”

“Tell me exactly when was the last time you saw Fern Mortensen.”

For a second time, Degner looked surprised and, for a brief moment, thoughtful. “Mortensen still doesn’t sound right. Tarkanian sounds better, don’t you think? That was her name before she married Brian.”

“And when did you last see the former Fern Tarkanian, Doctor?”

“Didn’t I answer this question before? We held a party a while back, a fund-raiser for some charity. I can’t remember who we were raising funds for. Homeless women? Illiterates? I don’t know. But it’s something we do periodically to get our name into the newspaper. Fern was there.”

“Did you accost her at the party?”

“Did she say that? Accost her? Oh God no. I talked to her, I was friendly. I don’t know, maybe she could have taken it the wrong way. I don’t exactly lack energy, and I was awfully glad to see her. We go way back, and she was a familiar face in a room full of homeless illiterate women. I was drawn to her; she was shelter in a storm. Do you go to those sorts of events, Detective? They’re horrible. Anyway, I did talk to Fern at the party.”

“Energetically?”

“Yes,” Degner chuckled again. “Most women respond well.”

“But Fern didn’t.”

He looked sad. “No.” He paused. “There was always tension between us, even when we were seeing each other. Fern’s a complicated woman.”

“Explain.”

“Well, she did have problems with my...” Degner paused. “My energy. But sometimes she loved it, seemed to need it somehow. Sometimes...” Degner fell silent.



“Sometimes what?”

“Sometimes she liked it...a little rough. Just a little. Other times, if I spoke too loudly she’d growl at me. Fern’s unpredictable. Sometimes, in bed, she was unbelievable, like she wanted to devour me. Other times, cold as stone. I couldn’t figure her out. But I’ve certainly never accosted that woman...Fern Mortensen. I was just glad to see her again.”

“Were you coming on to her?”

“Probably not.”

“What exactly did you say to her at the party?”

“What exactly? You think I’m a memory machine? I understand more about how memory works than 99.9 per cent of the human race, but that doesn’t mean I have a good one myself.”

“Do the best you can,” Ben said condescendingly.

“Okay. Let’s see. I asked her how she was. Whether she had finally acclimated to Boston’s weather. I asked her if she liked the cold?”

“You talked about the weather?”

“And about her life. Whether she liked Boston compared to California. That sort of thing.”

“Did you touch her?”

“Touch her? That I can’t remember. But I doubt it.”

“You didn’t touch her shoulders?”

“Her shoulders! God, she has beautiful shoulders. The best part of a woman, don’t you think? And hers are perfect.”

“Did you touch her shoulders?”

“I don’t remember. Did she say that I did?”

“What makes you think I asked her?”

“You’re not a foolish man, Detective Greenberg.”

“Kaplan. Detective Kaplan, and no, I’m not.”

“Sorry, I don’t remember.”

“Did she rebuff you?”

“Rebuff? I wouldn’t say that. She wasn’t warm, though.”

“But you were hoping that would change?”

“No, I didn’t give it that much thought.”

“Now that Brian’s out of the way, do you think you might make a play for her?”

“You’re a dirty old man, Detective, and terribly insensitive! Her husband hasn’t even been buried yet.”

“He’s going to be cremated.”

“Well, he hasn’t been cremated yet.”

“But do you think you might make a play for her soon?”

“She rebuffed me once. I usually don’t make the same mistake twice.”

“You just said she didn’t rebuff you at the party.”

“I meant back in California. I told you about that. She ended our relationship way back then.”

“And you’re still mad?”

“No.”

“You’re not used to being told no, are you Doctor Degner?”

“No, not really.”

“But both Fern and Brian said no to you. You weren’t happy about that, were you?”

“Long run, couldn’t care less.”

“You cared about Brian saying no. He was important. You wanted him.”

“I did. But, my God, he was only a scientist. These guys are smart but they’re a dime a dozen here in Boston.”

“This is Cambridge, Doctor.”

“Don’t be an ass Detective.”

“Brian wasn’t a typical scientist, from what I gather. I hear he was a superstar.”

“Superstar’s a bit strong. He is very good at what he does.”

“Was. Did. He’s dead now.”

“Yes he is.”

“And so your competition is eliminated. Casper’s shop was going to wipe your ass on sleep. He was going to leave you in the dust, wasn’t he? And you wanted to stop him. So you killed Brian. Two birds with one stone. Open a pathway to Fern, and give your company an edge on sleep.”

Neal looked shocked. Ben was uncharacteristically blunt and seemed to be tipping his hand.

“Now you’re starting to annoy me, Detective. I didn’t kill Brian. I want to kill Casper and everybody who works for him, but only in the lab and then on the market. That’s where our game is played. I want to beat them all to the finish line on sleep, that’s for sure. But no, I didn’t kill Brian Mortensen.”

“Are you sure?”

Degner laughed, paused, and then became serious. “Detectives, for the first time in history, it’s possible to design new treatments for diseases such as Alzeihmers, breast cancer, prostate cancer, and heart disease. We can aim directly at the molecular cause of the disease. Do you understand what that means? We’re going to make drugs that do more than manage symptoms. We’re getting to the source of disease itself. More effective drugs, with fewer nasty side effects, will be on the market soon because of the kind of work we do right here. Do you think I’d throw this all away because I got mad at Brian Mortensen?”

“I think you took his computer. He had the molecule on it, and the E.S.M.R.”

Degner looked interested. “Detective, do you actually know what those initials stand for?”

“Efficient synthetic manufacturing route.”

Neal looked impressed, but Degner just smiled and said, “You sound like you almost know something. But you don’t. Elpigen couldn’t possibly have been anywhere near the E.S.M.R.. The whole thing was probably just a pipe-dream anyway. Besides, even if they were toying with the E.S.M.R., no one would put it on a laptop. And, just to top off this line of reasoning, even if Brian was stupid enough to do that, I’d never take it from him. That would have been cheating,” he said with a smirk.

Ben stared at him for a moment and then asked, “Have you sent your condolences to Fern yet?”

“I sent her some flowers and a note, yes. Hand-written too. I was going to send her an email, but then I remembered that she doesn’t use it. Poor Fern. All alone.”

“She has two little girls to keep her company.”

“Right.”

“You killed Brian Mortensen, didn’t you Doctor Degner?”

Degner became stone cold and glared without responding.

“We found a pistol at the crime scene. A .22 caliber,” Ben said. “Guess who it was registered to?”

“Surprise me,” Degner responded.

“You.”

Degner looked shocked. For a moment he stared, slack-jawed at a chair between Neal and Ben without looking at either. Then he finally said, “that’s impossible, just impossible. What kind of pistol was it?”

“A Smith & Wesson model 41, with an adjustable target sight and a wooden grip. Registered to you in California.”

Lost in thought, Degner put his hand to his lower lip and pulled it down. For a moment he looked ridiculous. After a few more seconds he looked directly at Ben and said, “it was stolen. From my house. I remember now. It was taken during a robbery. I called the cops. I reported it missing, years ago. I’m sure that’s in the record too.”

“Yes it is.”

“I haven’t seen that gun in years. I think it was taken by one of the Mexicans who worked around my house at the time.”

“Didn’t you keep your guns locked up.”

“Of course I did, you ass!” he barked. “But those people are clever. Got ahold of my keys, made a copy, took one of my gun. Naturally, the cops couldn’t find out who took it. But I promise you, I haven’t seen the .22 in years.”

“You know what some people do, Doctor Degner?”

“What?”

“They stage a robbery, report a gun missing so that they can use it later with impunity. Did you do that?”

“Of course not, you stupid ass!”

“We think you might have.”

“You’re trying my patience,” Degner said slowly.

“Sorry about that. But you have to admit, this is quite a coincidence. Your gun plugged Brian Mortensen.”

“My ex-gun. I haven’t seen it in years. I reported it missing. End of story. And that’s your cue to leave.”

“So that’s it? Somehow your missing gun ends up in the South End of Boston where it shot Brian through the heart? Do you really expect us to buy it?” Ben asked quietly.

“What you buy is up to you. Last I was told this is a free country. And that means I’m free to tell you two to get off my property.”

The well-groomed doctor seemed agitated, but to his shame Ben was unable to read his face. The two tall men stood next to each other in silence for nearly a minute until Degner spoke: “Maybe one of the Mexicans moved here to Boston. They’re

migratory you know. I haven't seen that gun in years. And you assholes aren't going to convince me otherwise."

"Doctor Degner," Neal said. "One last question: did anyone see you when you got home on Tuesday night? Did you stop anywhere on the way? Can anybody verify your whereabouts?"

Degner looked condescendingly at Neal. "Yes, as a matter of fact. The concierge at my condo would have seen me."

"What time?"

"10:30 or so. Give or take."

"What's the concierge's name?"

"Juan. Or José. Or something like that. I don't know his last name. Nice fellow, though, I will say that. Very polite. Speaks decent English too."

"We're going to talk to him."

"Fine by me. Now, would you please leave and take your ridiculous stories with you. I haven't seen that gun in years. Check the records."

"This is just our protocol, Doctor. We're required to interview everyone involved in a murder."

"Bullshit." Degner stood up and with several long strides reached the door, which he opened with a gesture of mock graciousness. "By the way, when your investigation is over, I want my gun back."

Ben glared at Degner for a moment before speaking. "Did your father actually belong to the Nazi party, Dr. Degner, or was he just a sympathizer?"

Degner looked utterly baffled. "What the fuck?"

“You heard me.”

“My father? A Nazi?” He stared at them. “Why in God’s name would you say something like that? My father fought in World War Two. He was a banker.”

“We know that your father met with Hitler in 1937.”

“Met with Hilter?”

“Met with Hitler.”

“How in God’s name could he have done that. He would have been, what?” He stopped to calculate. “Less than 20 years old. He had just graduated from high-school. What are you talking about?”

“He went on a trip to Germany with some school friends in 1937. A bicycle trip.”

“A bicycle trip to Germany? Are you people insane?”

“No, we’re not. Check it out on the Internet.”

“Check what out?”

“Find the story in the *Lubbock Daily Register*. February 1, 1944. An interview with your father when he was home on leave.”

Degner stared at Ben, his eyes narrowed. “My father loved this country. You stupid bastards better watch what you’re saying. Don’t you have anything better to do than slander my father. He was in the Army, he was a small-town banker, he was a patriot. A Nazi? That’s disgusting. You’re disgusting.”

“Read the Internet, Dr. Degner,” Ben replied calmly. “You might learn something.”

“Get out of my god damned office right now or I’ll call the fucking mayor. You bastards are disgusting.”



“Sure thing, Doctor.”

Neal left the office, but Ben tarried one moment longer. “Did you know someone named Winfred Bennett? A tall, skinny black guy? Did you ever have any dealings with him at all?”

With this question, Degner hardened, and for a split second he reminded Ben of his pal, President Sarmiento. “I told you to leave, and I’m not going to tell you again.”

On the baking sidewalk, Neal barked at his partner. “Damn Ben, you fucked that up perfectly. Flinging accusations like mudpies. You crazy? I thought we should’ve gone slow on him.”

“It was his gun, so he’s a suspect. The computer might have been valuable to him. I had to give him a push. Get things moving. I was curious to see how he’d respond. He’s a tough cookie, like you said. I had to see if I could shake him.”

“And you thought that talking about his father might do that?”

“Don’t know. Didn’t really think. Just played a hunch.”

“Your fucking hunches are going to get us in trouble some day, Ben.”

“Trouble’s my middle name.”

“Like the man said, his father was a small-town banker, that’s all. He happened to bump into Adolph Hitler. Through no fault of his own!”

“It’s much worse than that, Neal. He liked the cleanliness and orderliness in Germany. Remember what he said: even the fucking underbrush in the forests was neat. That sounds like bad-news pathology to me.”

“So?”

“So he must have been a creep. Like his son.”

“I see. Sins of the father.”

“Sort of.”

“He said the gun was stolen. That’s on the record.”

“Gun gets stolen in California and ends up plugging a guy in Boston? What are on the odds on that?”

“Not likely. But also nothing yet to prove that he did it. And if he did do it, why would he leave it on the sidewalk for someone to find? That’s ridiculous.”

“He knew someone like Stringbean would pick it up, and then take the fall.”

“Why didn’t he just throw the gun into the river?”

“He likes playing games. He likes the action. With the gun officially stolen, and no one seeing him in the park, he grabs the computer and thinks he’s free and clear. And then he enjoys watching us dangle. After all, his father was a fucking Nazi. You ever hear of Doctor Mengele?”

“Who?”

“Mengele. Nazi scientist. Performed experiments on concentration camp Jews. Degner left the gun in order to see what would happen. An experiment. Have some fun.”

“You must really hate this guy.”

“No, just a hunch.”

Neal didn’t reply, and the two men walked back to the car in silence. Finally, Ben spoke. “Let’s call Juan, or José, and find out what time Degner got home that night. Why don’t you do some telephoning right now.”

“You might want me to work the phone right here, on the sidewalk in the broiling sun?”

“You’re right. Let’s hoof it over to the Stata Center, find a nice spot in the shade, and you can make your calls there. Bring your lap-top too. I’m sure it’s wireless there.”

As they were crossing the street, Neal said, “Degner’s a big-time creep, Ben, I grant you that. And he probably does want Fern back. He might even be capable of violence—I can feel that possibility in him. He wanted to beat the shit out of us in there. That much I felt for sure.”

“He’s playing us,” Ben said. “The only thing that surprised him was the newspaper article about his father. That was our only leverage.”

“Wrong. He was surprised by the gun too.”

Ben paused. “Pry him open and here's how it goes. Degner stuck on Fern. Hot for Brian too. So he goes over to the South End one night, figures he’ll talk to one or the other. Maybe he doesn't have a plan. But he lucks out. Only Fern is there. He puts the moves on her, but she says no. He's steaming, see, and when he leaves the apartment he bumps into Brian on the street coming home from work. Starts yelling at him, then blows him away. Leaves the gun, which he reported stolen but never was, and the wallet on the sidewalk just to have a little fun. Takes the computer because it might have something on it that’s valuable business-wise.”

“Once upon a time, there was a big bad CEO of a pharmaceutical company. Whose father was Doctor Mengele.”

“We can’t just let Stringbean take the rap on this one,” Ben interrupted. “He’s just another poor black kid getting chewed up by the system.”

“You sound like your father.”

Ben looked surprised and he wondered how much about his father he had really explained to Neal. “My father isn’t always wrong.”

“Really? First time I’ve ever heard you say that.”

Ben didn’t respond.

By the time they had crossed the street, and walked the few blocks to Frank Gehrey’s building, Ben’s bulky body was oozing sweat from head to toe. He didn’t cope well with humidity. When he was a kid, he could play ball for hours in the steaming heat of a Boston summer. Now he could hardly walk through it without expiring. When they arrived at the bench, he slumped into it gratefully. Then he reached into his sports jacket, hoping to find some tissue with which to wipe his face, but all he came up with were his cigarettes. He knew Neal would disapprove, but he lit one anyway.

"How can you smoke those things in this heat?"

"Cools me down and helps me think. Goes straight to my brain, fires my neurons and relaxes my muscles, all at the same time. Nicotine is a miracle drug, Neal; shame it's bad for my lungs. Cruel paradox, I'm sorry to say."

"Don't leave your heart out, my man. You've been getting any exercise Ben?"

"Just trying to keep up with you."

"Damn it Ben, when are you going to start taking care of yourself?"

"Soon as we solve this case."

"You promise me that when we close this case you'll start working out?"

“Call Juan first. Please.”

Neal looked disgusted with his partner. But he did pop open his laptop and began to search for the telephone numbers he needed. As soon as he did so, Ben fell asleep. A snippet of a dream in which Degner's smirking face loomed large. Before he could look more closely Neal woke him up to tell him that the night-shift concierge at Marina Bay was Jorge Posada. Neal found his home telephone number and called him on his cell. Señor Posada, an agreeable man who was so used to being imposed upon that he didn't mind having his sleep interrupted with questions about his recollection of Tuesday night, told Neal that he couldn't remember exactly when Doctor Degner had come home, but that it had to be after 10:30. He had been watching *Law and Order* at his desk, and he recalled that when Degner walked in the plot had just moved into its second phase: the lawyers, not the cops, were on screen, which meant that the rigidly scripted show had begun its second act. After 10:30 but before 11; of this he was sure.

After Neal thanked him for his help, he looked at Ben who seemed pleased by the information. Degner was still on the list. He could have committed the murder and gotten home before the end of *Law and Order*.

"You ever watch that show, Ben?"

"Nope."

"Sometimes it's not bad. Alice thinks it's fun. She says it's like watching you and me. You know, black cop white cop."

"I'm no fun to watch, Neal, tell her that."

"No need. She's met you."

Ben laughed softly. Every joint in his body hurt, especially his knees. He should have taken some ibuprofen but he doubted that would have helped. No, better to feel his pain. At least, he reasoned, that was still his.

"So what next?" Neal asked. "Bust Degner?"

"Not enough yet. Even with the gun."

"Interrogate him at the station?"

"He's too smart for that. He'd lawyer up. And after he finds the newspaper article about his father there's nothing we have that can take him by surprise."

"Tail him?"

"Not practical. He leaves late and my guess is that he is telling the truth and he usually goes straight home. And he doesn't always leave work at the same time. We'd be waiting around the place for hours and not learning much. You don't like working that late, and O'Toole won't spring for any extra help or overtime. Not when we already have Stringbean locked up."

"You're right about that," Neal said.

The two cops fell silent for a while. Then Ben lit another cigarette and stood up. At first he was almost unsteady on his feet, but after a few steps he regained his balance. He walked away from the bench and concentrated on the Stata Center until he finally found a chunk which had right angles. Suddenly he stopped, crushed his half-smoked cigarette with his foot, and walked quickly back to the bench.

"Believe it or not, I've got an idea."

Neal looked pained. "What?" he asked.

"Bernie Olen."

“Bernie Olen?”

“He takes a job at Epochal and becomes our inside man. We’re never going to get a decent picture of Degner from the outside. He’s too smart. We need somebody inside, and Bernie can do the job. We’ll have eyes and ears inside Epochal Pharmaceuticals and then we can find out who this Nazi bastard really is.”

“What makes you think Bernie would take a job with Epochal? I thought he liked working for Casper.”

“He does, but he loved Brian. He’ll do it, and his cover is perfect. He can tell Degner that with Brian gone, his research is over at Elpigen. He needs a fresh start, so he’d like to know if Degner would reconsider hiring him. I’m betting Degner will bite.”

“And that Bernie will go along with this?”

“Yup. He’s distraught, but I think he’s a stand-up guy. And he might even like the action.”

“You gotta be kidding me. He may have big muscles but he’s not that tough.”

“What you really mean is that he’s gay.”

“No, man, I didn’t say that.”

“I didn’t say you said it.”

Neal looked sheepish. “All right. Chalk this one up to a prejudice if that makes you feel better. I just don’t think he can toe the line.”

“What makes you think gay guys don’t like action? Maybe Kojak was gay.”

“Kojak?”

“Old TV cop.”

Neal was becoming annoyed. "Do me a favor and shove Kojak up your ass. I'm just not used to working with gay guys, that's all. Plus, I'm guessing that cat's on steroids. You see those muscles and that neck? And his head?"

"Hell, Neal, how do you know I'm not gay?"

Neal smiled. "Because you haven't made a pass at me and I know I'm irresistible. Plus, you're a monk. You don't do a damn thing with anybody."

Ben smiled again. "Maybe I have a secret life that I keep from you, partner."

"Bullshit. You watch the Red Sox, the Patriots, and the Celtics, and occasionally you get drunk with your pal Bobby Doyle. As far as I can tell, that's it."

"Maybe." For a third time, Ben smiled.

"All right, all right," Neal said. "Are you really gonna ask Bernie?"

Instead of answering Neal's question, Ben took out his own cell phone and called Bernie. Mister Muscle wasn't home.

"That's a good sign," Ben said. "He must be feeling a little better, so he went to the gym."

"Should we wait for him to get home?"

"Nah, let's go visit him there."

"You really want this guy to change his job just so you can go Nazi-hunting? You must be out of your mind."

"Nazis everywhere, Neal. Cossacks too. Better watch out."

Neal looked at his partner, but couldn't figure out if he was annoyed or amused.



## II.7

Ben couldn't stomach the places that people now called gyms. In his day, a gym was a dingy, deliciously stinky place, walled by dented metal lockers, where you quickly got dressed and then went to the court to play basketball. Today they were palaces filled to the brim with whirring machines, sparkling TVs, floor to ceiling mirrors, carpeted locker rooms, and endless bottles of water, places where industrious people worked out, and in them there was never a bit of play. The spectacle of dozens of people strapped to machines, measuring their heartbeat and churning their legs fervently but going nowhere, earplugs firmly stuck in their ears and eyes glued to the screen, was to Ben a vision of hell.

WellBeing was a small, elegantly appointed gym in the South End catering, it appeared, solely to gay men. Plushly carpeted, it had mahogany woodwork and the usual collection of treadmills, stationary bikes and elliptical machines, each equipped with its own miniature TV screen situated between the handlebars, and topped with a small pot of flowers. The standard array of free weights and lifting stations were in a room of their own. Ben was right. Bernie was there lying on his back in the middle of a complicated weight machine that seemed to work both his shoulders and chest. Ben wasn't sure what muscles he was using. He guessed pectorals, but only because the word had popped into his head. Bernie's face was red, infused with the exertion of his narcissism. He was wearing tight fitting spandex shorts, and a loose, sleeveless tee shirt. He seemed genuinely glad to see Ben, but when he noticed that Neal was with him, he looked

worried. He told the detectives that he'd be done in a few minutes and that he'd meet them in the lobby.

Sipping his bottle of water, Bernie seemed stunned by Ben's suggestion that he leave Casper and go to work for Michael Degner. Ben was gentle with Bernie, and rather than push him he reasoned with him by slowly explaining that they thought Degner was the bad guy, and that they had no other way of proving this without finding out as much about him as they possibly could. Bernie appeared sceptical and explained that he didn't want to betray Casper. Although he wasn't planning to do so, Ben played his card.

"Okay, Bernie, think about this. Michael Degner's father knew Hitler"

"What?"

"That's right. He met with him in 1937. There's a story on the Internet. Check out the *Lubbock Daily Register*, February 1, 1944. Robert Degner was on a bicycle trip and he met with Adolph Hitler in Berlin."

"My God."

Ben was tempted to ask Bernie whether he too had lost relatives in Europe, but he resisted and let the muscle-man, who now had what looked like a little smile on his face, think it through on his own. After a few seconds, he blurted out, "let's do it! Yes, let's do it!"

Bernie claimed to see, even to admire, the logic of Ben's plan, and he was willing to play the game. Ben felt a sharp rush of satisfaction, which he immediately tried to suppress. The last thing he wanted to do was say 'I told you so' to Neal. But it did seem that once Bernie got a whiff of the action, he wanted to be part of it. And not just because he loved Brian. The chance to do some snooping around seemed to appeal to him. His

cover story, the one he'd bring to Michael Degner, the incarnation of Big Pharma, would be that he needed a fresh start, a new shop, where he could forget the horrible past.

Throughout their conversation Ben referred casually to Bernie's relationship with Brian, just to make sure that the muscle man knew that he had shared this information with his partner. At first Bernie looked uncomfortable, but Neal did a good job of taking it all in stride and defusing any possible tension. Bernie did ask whether Ben had told Fern or anyone else.

"I haven't," Ben replied. "Not yet. But as I told you before, if it's going to help the investigation I'll have to spill the beans."

Bernie looked disappointed, but resolved. "I understand."

And so it was that Bernie Olen, molecular biologist, obsessive weight lifter, and Brian Mortensen's lover, pulled out his cell phone. When he mentioned his name he was put straight through to the CEO of Epochal, Inc.. "Michael," Bernie sang out. "Michael, it's Bernard Olen. I want to have a talk with you as soon as possible. I have a little proposal to make, one that will work to our mutual advantage."

Bernie smiled when Degner something in return, and then continued, "Okay. tomorrow at noon it is. Thanks so much." He smiled triumphantly at the two detectives. "See, I did it."

"Nice work, Bernie," Ben said. He resisted the urge to give a little wink to his pal Neal.

“Now what?” Neal asked Ben, when the two of them were walking towards Neal’s car. “Or can I just go home? I’m still worried about Alice. Don’t know how she’s holding up?”

“She’ll get used to it, just like the rest of us.”

“Used to what?”

“Wondering what’s going to blow up next.”

Neal looked pained. “Thanks a lot. Can I go home? It’s getting late.”

“Sure,” Ben said. “Say hi to Alice for me. And Derrick too. Give him...what do you call it? Right...a hug. From me. Uncle Ben.”

“Sure thing,” Neal said sadly.

“Do me one favor, though, before you leave.”

“What?”

“Find out where Bennett’s grandmother is. Her name is Ada Mae Williams. She works two jobs. Tell me where she is, and I’ll interview her.”

“Shit, Ben, it’s getting late. We don’t really have to do this, do we?”

“You don’t, I do. I want a little more.”

Neal reluctantly opened his lap-top and cell phone and in fifteen minutes found out where Ada Mae Williams was. He told Ben that she was an employee of Spotless Technologies and was still at work cleaning an office in the Prudential Center. Then he looked at his partner and said firmly, “Calm down. Don’t get started.”

“Why not? There’s a connection!” Ben said, controlling his enthusiasm as best as he could.

Neal refused to smile. “Just a coincidence, my friend.”

“You still believe in those?”

“Damn, Ben, you’re just playing a game, making up all kinds of crap. Spinning your wheels.”

“My narrative wheels, you mean?”

“I’m going home.”

“That’s fine, Neal, really it is. You know me. I have to work these things through in my own way.”

“You mean in your own pathetic, lonely, obsessive way, don’t you?”

“Yes. Exactly.”

“Then be my guest. I’m going home.”

Ben glanced at his watch: 5:30, the perfect time to visit his father. Although he felt a strong impulse to go directly to the Prudential Center and interview Ms. Williams, he knew that could wait until after dinner. So he dutifully entered his battered Volvo and drove to the Work.

After a conversation-less meal that was nearly identical to the previous night’s, Ben agreed to sit with Abe and Edith in what was grandiosely called the ‘Palm Court,’ but was really no more than a plain common room that contained several lifeless couches and some potted plants. While they were there a few residents, all using walkers, drifted through on their way to the TV room. Abe greeted, and Ben recognized, most of them.

Rubie Cooper, whose bent back was nearly horizontal to the ground; Betty Winograd, upright and lucid, but wearing a jet black wig that looked absurd; Jennie Copeland, confined to a wheelchair, huge and cheerful. His father barked the same question at each of them as they passed: “Have you met my son?”

Abe was explaining for the third time how nice the people were in the kitchen. They didn’t make bupkus for wages, and nobody was teaching them good English, but still they cheerfully accommodated his vegetarian needs. As he was talking, Ben noticed that Abe’s pants were stained with the yellowing crust of dried urine. His father’s incontinence was becoming more of a problem, and Ben wasn’t sure what to do. He hadn’t been able to bring himself to buy adult diapers yet. In fact, he had never even discussed the problem with Abe. He told himself that he didn’t want to embarrass his father, especially in front of Edith, but he knew that he was protecting himself more than his father. But Abe wasn’t smelling good, and Ben understood that he had to do something. For eventually even Edith would notice it.

“Pop, I’m going to do some errands in your room.”

This was the standard line he used when he was about to go to Abe’s room in order to put his clothes away, check for mail, and clean it up.

“Okay. That’s nice,” Abe said. He turned to Edith: “The kid fixes my room. What do you think of that? Any of your daughters do that?” Edith smiled but didn’t respond.

Abe hadn’t used the word “shitty” once during the entire visit nor had he criticized Ben. Two or three times he had expressed his appreciation of the life, however diminished, he had at the Work. In its safe confines he belonged to a world and was surrounded by people who, because he couldn’t remember much about them from day to

day, were often surprising to him. The staff was patient with him and seemed to be attentive. He didn't have to walk much, shop, cook, or do anything to take care of himself. When he had first arrived at the Work this level of dependence had enraged him, but he no longer fumed about being treated like a child. The fact that someone came into his room first thing in the morning and once at night to check up on him, and on Fridays to clean it up, now seemed to please him. He lived in the midst of kindred spirits who, if they were able to voice an opinion, were unanimous in the verdict that George Bush was a war-monger and maybe the worst President in the history of the United States. Abe could complain more loudly than any of his mates, so he typically felt a lot better than he had expected.

Best of all, Abe hadn't launched a tirade against cops and fascists. Ben was still on edge, expecting one to arrive, but it hadn't.

Ben performed his standard chores in Abe's room. He put the dirty clothes in the hamper, picked up the scraps of paper strewn about, collected the mail and was ready to leave. But as he surveyed the room for a last time he had an idea. He took three pairs of pants from the closet, put belts in them, and laid them in what he assumed were strategic places: one draped over the desk chair, and one on top of the dresser. Abe would have several pairs of pants at his disposal, so the odds that he'd wear one that wasn't so dirty improved. Ben was pleased with himself. Before he left the room he took one last glance at it, and felt satisfied that his father's life was intact.

When Ben explained to his father that he had to get back to work, the old man didn't crack a nasty joke about locking up black kids. Instead, he said, "thanks for coming. Come back any time."

Ben walked slowly to his car, and his step felt a bit more solid than usual. He lit a cigarette before entering the old Volvo, and exhaled his smoke gratefully while looking back at the front porch of the Work. He couldn't identify what he was going on inside of him, but for a moment he felt strangely at peace. He allowed himself to linger, but when he crushed the butt underneath his worn shoe he snapped back into himself. He eased himself slowly into the driver's seat and headed back downtown.

When Ben exited the elevator on the fifteen floor of the Prudential Center, he immediately noticed a woman washing a glass door emblazoned with the name 'Chrematech.' Ben had no idea what this company did, and no interest, but he was confident that the large, handsome woman who was doing the work was Ada Mae Williams. Probably around 55, she carried her bulk with grace. When Ben introduced himself as a cop she knew it was about her grandson.

"I haven't seen Winfred in about a week or two. Is that boy in trouble again?"

"I'm afraid so Ma'am. We think he may have been involved in a shooting."

"Oh my god." The woman needed to sit down, and so she and Ben sat next to each other on a couch at the end of the hall. "He's not a bad boy."

"I've heard others say the same thing, Ma'am. Did he use drugs?"

"Win smoked some grass, I do know that. I used to smell it in the apartment all the time. But that's all he did, and he needed to get high, I think. His mother wasn't around much, he never knew his father, and he had a lot of responsibilities. He was not a



happy boy, but he wasn't bad, not really. He had some sweetness in him. You should have seen him take care of his sisters. He was wonderful."

*Winfred placed the two plates on the kitchen counter, and he ladeled a scoop of white rice onto each. Then he took the peas out of their boiling water, made sure he had drained as much liquid from them as possible, and placed them carefully next to the rice. He paused for just a second to admire the contrast of colors. His reverie was interrupted by the chime of the microwave. The chicken was hot. He took the plate out, and put two pieces on each plate. Not quite happy with the angle of the meat, he rearranged each piece and then brought the plates to the kitchen table, neatly folded a napkin and put a fork and a knife on it. He poured two glasses of milk, and again paused to admire his handiwork. Then he called his two sisters.*

*"Yo, Brianna, Tashana, supper ready!"*

*The two girls, 8 and 10, came immediately, nearly running from their bedroom. Both were giggling.*

*"What ya'll laughing at?" their brother asked.*

*"Nothing," Brianna, the older, said.*

*"You laughing at something. Nobody laughs at nothing."*

*"Yes we do Winfred," Tashana said. "We do that all the time."*

*"Yeah, well you stop your laughing now and get down to eating your supper."*

*The girls didn't stop laughing but they did pick up their forks and began to eat with enthusiasm.*

*"Can we have some soda, Winfred?" Tashana asked.*

*“What’d do you say?”*

*“I said, can we have some soda?”*

*“What’d you say?”*

*“Can we have some soda...please?”*

*“That’s better. But you know what the answer is? It’s no. You drink your milk. Ya’ll can have soda for desert.”*

*The girls were obedient, drank their milk, ate their dinners. And had soda for desert. When they were done, Winfred excused them and began cleaning the table. Again, he enjoyed every step of this process. He cleaned, dried, and put the dishes away. He wiped the counter. As always, he wanted the kitchen to look good when his grandmother came home. Only when he was about to put the remaining chicken back into the refrigerator did he realize that he himself hadn’t eaten. Even though he didn’t particularly want to, he took a piece out and nibbled on it slowly.*

*His grandmother, Ada Mae Williams, didn’t return home from work until nearly 9. Winfred and his sisters were watching TV, the house was clean, the older woman was pleased, and greeted the children warmly. She heated up the remaining chicken for herself and sat with her grandchildren in the livingroom. Then she announced that she was a little tired, words that meant she was exhausted from having worked since 6 that morning, and would go to bed. The girls went to their room, his grandmother to hers, and Winfred was alone in the living room. He opened up the sofa, got a sheet, a blanket and a pillow from the closet, and prepared his bed. Then he went to the one window in the living room, and opened it wide. He lit the joint and inhaled deeply.*

*Stoned, he returned to the sofa and watched a bit more TV. The thorough soaking of warmth that he received from the pot was the only way he could endure the shame of not having a room, of having to depend on an old woman who was stronger than he would ever be, a woman who affectionately called him "Win." Stoned, he could watch the flickering images on the TV and not worry about what they meant or who they were or what they were trying to tell him. Stoned, he didn't have to worry about when to pick up his stash, when to make deliveries, or keep track of the money. Stoned, he could almost dream.*

"Win's not a bad boy, Detective. Mixed up in all the nonsense of the streets, just like the rest of them. He did a shooting? Oh my God. My poor baby, I'm so sorry he's in jail."

"I understand Ma'am. I'm sorry too. Did you know another boy, same age as Winfred, named Dennis Williams? He went to school with Winfred, and now he works for the same company as you. Kids on the street call him Blinky."

"Blinky? I don't know no Blinky. He works for Spotless? I never met him if he does. Mostly we just get told where to go and we go there. We don't really see anybody except our supervisor. His name is Carlos."

"So you never met Dennis Williams?"

"Don't believe I have," the woman said.

"And he's not a relative of yours?"

Ada Mae looked offended. "There's a lot of Williams out there," she hissed.

“Did you ever work in a building over in Kendall Square?”

“Kendall Square?”

“In Cambridge. Near MIT.”

“Oh that big one, with a purple sign on top?”

“Yes, Ma’am. That’s Epochal Pharmaceuticals.”

“Carlos has sent me there before. Several times. Cleaning door windows like that one over there, mostly. That building’s got a lot of them.”

“And did you ever meet a man over there, a tall, white man, about as tall as me, named Michael Degner?”

“I did have a chat with a tall man over there, I remember that. He was very nice. Asked me if I was doing okay. I remember that because he was nice to Winfred too.”

“To Winfred?”

“Yes. My boy sometimes used to bring me my dinner when I was working late. He did that one night over in that Cambridge building. He brought me some Chinese food. And that’s when he met—what was his name?—the tall white man who was the boss. A very nice man. He told Winfred to come see him in his office if he ever wanted a job.”

“Did Winfred do that?”

“I doubt it. Working’s not that boy’s specialty.”

“But you’re sure that Winfred did meet Michael Degner?”

“Yes. Why do you care about that?”

“No reason, Ma’am. Just need the details. Your grandson is in jail, but I don’t think he’s the bad guy on this particular crime. I’m trying to figure out what really happened.”

“Thank you, Officer. I appreciate that. Win’s not a bad boy. Not really. Not deep down.”

## II.9

Ben's mind was flying and he felt as if he had just nailed a jump shot in the last seconds of a game to seal a victory, a feat which in reality he had never come close to accomplishing. As he had hoped, and almost suspected, there was a connection between Winfred Bennett and Michael Degner. String may have pulled the trigger, but he wasn't acting alone. He couldn't wait to get back to the jail and talk to String, and this he had to tell Neal, so he called his partner.

"Oh shit, Neal," Ben said, "did I wake you up? It's only 9:30."

"Don't worry about it. What's up?"

Ben explained rapidly. Neal had to calm him down. "Hey man, it's lights out at the City Jail so we couldn't talk to Stringbean even if I wanted to."

Ben knew that, unfortunately, his partner was right. "I'm sorry I woke you Neal. Go back to sleep. Let's meet at the jail first thing in the morning. Around 8."

"Right."

"Good-night, Neal."

"Yeah," his partner grunted.

With all avenues to more work closed down for the night, Ben felt slightly disoriented and became tense. He knew he was vulnerable. For it was when he stopped moving that his troubles began. Most nights, when he first lay down in bed he'd feel the heavy weight of his fatigue and would be grateful for the comfort of his sheets. Even after all these years, he was sure he had a chance to fall asleep. But four times out of five

he was wrong, for soon energy would pour into him from all sides, and he would be unable to lie still. And if it didn't happen to him when he first tried to fall asleep, he was sure to wake up an hour later.

After phoning Neal, he had no idea what to do. He realized he hadn't eaten in a while and that the Red Sox game might still be on, so he drove over to his favorite Chinese joint on Beacon Street, ordered beef and broccoli with extra fried rice and three egg rolls, and then went home.

The Sox were down a run to the Yankees in the 8<sup>th</sup> inning when he settled down in front of his TV, and they had lost the game by the time he ate his fortune cookie. He cleaned up his small apartment, checked the computer for the latest update on the London Bombings. The big news of the day was that the cops there had shot and killed a man at a subway station. He had been wearing a large overcoat and hadn't stopped when he was told to by the cops. They had shot him immediately, directly into his brain, as they had been trained to do so that he couldn't trigger his bomb. Of course, he had no bomb. Initial reports were that the guy was a Brazilian who didn't speak English, and hadn't understood a word of what was being screamed at him.

"Ach, goddamn cops," Ben said out loud, to no one. "Never did nobody any good ever."

He took a hot shower, even though his apartment was hot, and then got into bed. Picking up his book, *Health Cares* by Daniel Roder, waves of fatigue washed over him, and he fell asleep immediately. He quickly entered into a dream. Luis Tiant was pitching for the Sox. Barry Bonds was up—an impossibility since Tiant had retired before Bonds began his remarkable ascent as a power hitter—and he hit a home run, a home run so

long that, travelling like a cannonball over the right field bleachers, it actually left Fenway Park. Breaking a sacred rule of baseball Bonds pranced slowly around the bases, woofing at and taunting Tiant the whole time.

“That ball hit the moon, baby, hit the moon,” he yelled gleefully.

Tiant glared at him.

Soon it was top of the 9<sup>th</sup> of the same game, and the Sox were ahead by a run.

Tiant struck out the first two batters he faced on eight pitches. He was preparing to strike out the third when he realized that Bonds was three batters away from coming to the plate again. He motioned to his catcher to come to the mound and whispered something to him. The catcher, whom Ben could not identify but might have been Carlton Fisk, looked at his pitcher incredulously, but then nodded his head. Tiant then proceeded to walk the next three batters, not with the standard pitch used for the intentional walk, but with four outside fastballs. Barry Bonds came to the plate, bases loaded. The Red Sox manager, whom Ben also could not identify, came to the mound, and Tiant listened patiently but obliviously to him. The manager returned to the dugout, shaking his head, and Tiant focused on Barry Bonds. The first pitch was a wicked fastball, high and inside. Bonds had to jump back quickly to avoid being hit. The next pitch was another fastball, this time a bit low, that nipped the outside corner of the plate. Tiant got the call. Strike one. The third pitch went directly to the same place and Bonds swung at it and missed. One and two. Tiant glared at Bonds and mouthed the words “same place, amigo.” Sure enough the next pitch, as if following a map, hit precisely the same spot as the previous two and Bonds once again swung and missed.



Next Tiant was in the media room facing questions from admiring reporters. “No,” he said with a straight face, “I didn’t walk three batters intentionally. Pitcher gotta be crazy to do that.”

“What I think of Barry Bonds? Man’s a great hitter, simple as that.”

“No. I wasn’t mad. All part of the game. All part of the fun.”

Ben woke up angry, angry at Bonds, angry at Michael Degner, angry at himself for having slept for only about an hour. He got out of bed, his body knotted in tension. He tried to stretch, but wasn’t in the mood, so he went to the kitchen to polish off the last egg roll. When he returned to bed he fell asleep immediately. To his delight, when he next work up the clock read 4, which meant that he had slept for a few hours. This time what he felt coursing through him was the same surge of happiness he had felt when Ada Mae Williams told him that her grandson had met Michael Degner. He knew he wouldn’t sleep much more that night, but figured that he had already gotten enough to get him through the next day, a day he could not wait to begin. So he went into his tiny kitchen to make himself some toast.