

Sweet Dreams: A Tale of Woe.

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Part One: Death in a Dugout.

“Dead white guy in the South End.” That’s what Sally, the knockout who worked the phones in the homicide unit, said. Or what Ben, his neurons barely firing, thought she said. She had awakened him from a dream in which he was riding a bicycle up a steep hill, the muscles in his thighs pushing with all their might but making no progress at all. This dream, like most, puzzled him since he hadn’t been on a bike since childhood.

“Dead white guy in the South End?”

“That’s what I just said, Ben,” Sally replied. “Did I wake you up?”

“Of course not,” he lied. “What time did they find the body?”

“Just before six.”

Ben glanced at the clock next to his bed: six-forty. A spasm of anger shot through him. “Why didn’t you call me right away?” he asked sharply.

“I wanted you to get some sleep.”

The anger dissipated when he heard the warmth in Sally’s husky friendly voice and Ben was reminded of her husky friendly body, a body that he had more than once been tempted to touch. Ben never had, and Sally was right: he had needed some sleep.

“Thanks, Sal. So what’s up?”

“Some white guy in the South End shot. Middle of the night. Wallet missing. Chuck says it’s a robbery gone bad. Perp probably from the projects.”

Chuck, from forensics, could manage his small bit of technology, but he was no rocket scientist. He wasn’t even a detective.

“Okay,” Ben said, “where?”

“Peters Park. Washington Street.”

Ben knew the location. Boston calls itself a city, but it’s really just an old town, so it’s easy to know all of it. Plus, except for two years in the Army, and two more across the river at Harvard in Cambridge, Ben had lived in Boston his whole life. Peters was a badly neglected but much used park, with a basketball and a tennis court, and occupying its eastern flank, the Luis Tiant Little League Field. One of the great Red Sox pitchers, Ben remembered well the beautiful three-hitter Tiant had thrown against the Oakland Athletics in the 1975 playoffs. He hadn’t seen it, but the radio guys had done a fine job painting the picture in words.

Across the street from Peters Park an old factory, recently transformed into luxury condos, was filled to the brim with the newly wealthy. Down the street was the Cathedral Housing Development. The park was the buffer zone, a no man’s land up for grabs. Kids from the projects played basketball and baseball, a few of the gentry lobbed tennis balls back and forth, or walked their exceptionally well groomed dogs, and citizens of various stripes wandered through its dirt paths or sat under its trees when it was hot. That’s why Chuck had assumed robbery. The best his tiny brain could cook up was the picture of a young black man killing a rich, white newcomer. As much as he didn’t want to admit it, Ben had to admit that this probably would have been his first hunch as well.

“Okay. Will you call Neal?”

“Of course I will,” she said. “What do you think I am, a bag of dirt?” Sally’s standard retort to a question she thought beneath her.

“No, Sally dear, you’re anything but a bag of dirt,” he answered. “Forensics been there for a while?”

“Yeah. Chuck said they’d be finishing up in about an hour.” Sally paused and as if changing the subject entirely asked, “Did I wake you up, Ben?”

“No, Sweetie,” he lied again. “It’s nearly seven, I’ve been up for hours, doing the chores. Cows have to be milked, you know.”

Sally snorted. She was such an agreeable woman, and Ben enjoyed making her laugh, which wasn’t hard.

“Tell ‘em I’ll be there in a few minutes. Tell ‘em not to leave till I get there.”

“Okay, Ben. I’ll call Neal.”

“Thanks.”

He got out of bed, feeling like that bag of dirt Sally wasn’t. Weighted down by bone-bruising fatigue from another night of tossing and turning, Ben’s legs still felt as if they were vibrating to the point of explosion. Twice, at 1 and 3, he had given into the burning sensation he felt in his stomach, the one that masqueraded as hunger but couldn’t possibly be, and had gone to the kitchen to make toast and drink seltzer. He had peed six times, only four of which produced a significant stream. He hoped the painful fog would lift after he took his cold shower, got dressed, had a cigarette and a coffee or two. Or three.

As usual he couldn’t identify what exactly had kept him awake. It could have been the picture of his son Paul that had been flashing in his head somewhere between 11 and 1. More likely, it was the recurring image of Señora Mondaly. In late May, after a week of heavy duty digging, he and Neal had found her son’s killer, a teenager named Mariano Rivera. He had shot Pedro Mondaly twice in the chest at a illegal dance club

during a tiff over a girl. Apparently his honor had been tarnished by something Pedro had said, and, in his mind anyway, he had no other option. Ben had handled the investigation badly. He felt he had been abrupt when he first went to Señora Mondaly's tiny apartment in Dorchester to tell her that her son was dead. The poor woman, compact, strongly built, handsome, screamed and fell to the linoleum floor. Ben thought she was having a seizure, but it was the shock of grief that had knocked her down. Not once during his three or four visits to her did Ben feel as if he had said the right thing. He had tried to show his outrage to her when he promised that he'd find her son's killer, tried to be sympathetic when he mentioned to her that he too had a son, but even though she spoke English well his words didn't register. And when he arrived for his final visit, eager to tell Señora Mondaly that Mariano Rivera was in custody, hopeful that his words would lighten the dark cloud of gloom that surrounded her, he failed again. She looked at him blankly and muttered, with no conviction at all, "gracias."

When Paul's image left around 1, Señora Mondaly's took his place, and as far as Ben could tell, the poor woman had probably spent the rest of the night with him. Until, of course, he had somehow ended up on a bicycle.

Ben Kaplan, a detective in the homicide unit of the Boston Police Department, was getting too old for the job. He was 54, and been a cop for nearly 30 years, the last 20 in homicide. He couldn't run fast, he peed a lot, and even after the unusual event of a decent night's sleep his whole body ached when he hauled his bulky frame out of bed. Though he vowed to smoke no more than three cigarettes a day, to eat vegetables, and to make it to the Y for a swim at least once a week, he failed regularly on all counts. He

took a multi-vitamin and a baby aspirin every day, and drank a glass of red wine whenever he ate a real dinner, which wasn't often. He did all of those things because they were supposed to keep him alive a little bit longer than he actually deserved.

When Doctor Rubin, who was himself seriously overweight, told Ben that he should start taking Lipitor to lower his cholesterol, Ben told him to go fuck himself. Sure he was carrying a few extra pounds, but not that many. Ben refused to enslave himself to a drug. His addictions to nicotine and caffeine were bad enough.

At first glance, one might take Ben Kaplan to be of one the many professors who prowled the streets of Boston. His graying beard was neatly trimmed and he had a good sized semitic nose, on which rested his rimless glasses. His brow was furrowed in what looked like scholarly reflection, his large well-shaped head was nearly bald, and he kept his few remaining patches of hair sheared short. His height, a shade above 6' 4", and the fact that he usually wore a sports jacket, made him look like he was about to deliver a lecture. Even that slight air of dissipation, of something being not quite right with his eyes, that extra weight, and the difficulty he had getting up from chairs, fit the professorial profile.

But on a second glance, anyone who knew the academic scene could tell that Ben Kaplan was no professor. The way he walked would tell you that his authority came not from his studies, but from his body and his suffering. The way he talked and, more important, the way he listened, would tell you that he wasn't about to give a lecture after all. If you looked at his serious face carefully, you could tell that he wasn't a self-absorbed asshole. And if you'd spent any time around Boston's professors, you'd know that this dramatically decreased his chances of being one. No: Ben Kaplan was a

homicide detective dragging himself out of bed once again on a Wednesday morning in mid-July.

When he completed this task, he stood for a moment, surveying the chaos of his bed, which seemed to be scene of an attack. The top sheet was crumpled, the contour had been pulled off the mattress and was all bunched up as if it had been pushed ashore by a mean-spirited tide. The blanket and pillows were on the floor. Ben sighed and then turned to the job of restoring the bed to order. Done, the bed was once again as trim as the rest of the sparsely furnished bedroom.

Ben stepped into the shower and turned it on full blast, all cold. As always the intense jet of biting water instantly propelled him into song. *And we know we belong to the land, And the land we belong to is grand*, he belted out.

When he finished rinsing, he turned the faucet off and then carefully used his squeejie to wipe the shower stall dry.

After drying himself quickly, he returned to his bedroom. As always his clothes were neatly draped on the one chair in the room, a classic, black leather Eames with matching ottoman, flanked by two tightly packed mahogany bookcases. On top of one was a Tizio lamp, and on the other a Bose CD player and radio. He dressed in a flash and after a quick survey of his livingroom, furnished with only a black leather couch, a coffee table, and a large TV, moved on to the kitchen. There was a laptop computer open on his small table. He turned it on and while it was booting up he cleaned up the mess that he had made during the night. The table was littered with crumbs from the several pieces of toast he had made. A container of soy-margarine was still on it, as was an open jar of

grape jam and an empty bottle of seltzer. He tidied it all up, and also swept the crumbs away from the toaster on his counter and into the sink.

When he was done and the computer was ready, he clicked to the front page of the *New York Times*. Ben glanced at the screen. A good day so far: no bombings. No attacks, just the somehow reassuring stories about China's growing economic might and the steady string of casualties in Iraq. The only item that caught his interest was about Syrian men on a waiting list to deploy themselves in Iraq as suicide bombers. He began to read it but turned the computer off abruptly when he felt his stomach begin to tighten.

As he often did, as soon as he left the apartment he realized he had forgotten his pistol. He put the key back in the lock and returned to his bedroom. The Glock 17 was in its usual place: in its holster next to the Tizio lamp, waiting patiently for Ben to strap it on around his waist. Reluctantly he did so.

Leaving the apartment, Ben walked the two flights down to the street. On the sidewalk he stopped to light a cigarette, a Nat Sherman classic, pure tobacco, no chemicals. As he did most mornings, at least when the weather was good, he sat down on the stoop of his building, a compact, four story, brick row house, typical of the Back Bay. Commonwealth Avenue was calm. After a wet Spring and early summer, the trees of the mall that ran the middle of Commonwealth and stretched all the way downtown to the Public Garden, were lush. A luxurious straight line, paralleled by two equally straight lines of parked cars on each side of the street. This early traffic heading downtown was minimal, and only a couple of women were walking on the mall, their purposeful strides making it obvious that they were exercising. Even though he had never been there, Ben thought the scene looked European. Each building was crafted with some

care, and even if all were roughly the same size, each was unique. Some, like his own, were plain brick with slated roofs and unobtrusive dormers. Others, like the building next to his, were more ornate, with columns, and gargoyles, statues of owls dotting the windows, elaborate curving iron bars over the first floor and basement windows. In the Back Bay there wasn't always a correlation between the grandeur of the exterior and the quality of an interior, for some of the simpler buildings contained vast townhouses, while others, like his own, were divided into small apartments. The street confidently exuded the solidity of its age, as if its rhythms had been the same for generations and would never change. Ben had never felt quite at home in the Back Bay, even though he had moved there from Jamaica Plain soon after his divorce nearly 20 years ago, but he came close to liking it. Or, at least, he thought he did.

While he smoked, Ben stared blankly at the rough hewn profile of Domingo Sarmiento, a former president of Argentina, whose statue, for reasons he didn't understand and never bothered to research, had been given a place of honor in the middle of the Commonwealth Mall. The only feature of the lurking, stocky figure that Ben could make out from his stoop was his scowl.

As the nicotine worked its magic, relaxing his muscles and clearing his mind enough so that he could actually see the outline of the hours to come, Ben guessed that this would turn out to be the best moment of his entire day. He gathered his long legs underneath him to stand up, and then walked to the street, where he snuffed out his cigarette and placed it in a trash container. As he did so he gave the statue one last glance. "See you later pal," he said aloud.

Ben walked to his car, which was parked directly in front of his building. The choice parking space was the one award he had received after decades of public service. The 25th anniversary of his stint on the Boston Police force coincided with his having single-handedly cracked the case of the Boston Mangler, a killer who would have sex with his victim, stab her to death with two or three deep thrusts to the chest, and then mangle her body. He broke the wrists and fingers, bashed in the nose, dislocated the shoulders, and finished his gruesome work by carving thin lines on the legs, buttocks and back of his five victims, all prostitutes.

The Mangler turned out to be a mild-mannered nurse named Alfred Garussi who worked for Boston General Hospital. He had eluded the police for nearly a year. What had finally tipped Ben off was the methodical pattern of the murders. The killer used two different knives, one for the death blows to the chest, the other for the lines he then drew with geometric precision. The horribly precise damage he inflicted on the dead women suggested to Ben that the killer knew the human body well, and the bloody lines he drew were surgical. The corpses had each been dumped on one of the many construction sites scattered around downtown Boston, all part of the massive project known as the Big Dig. One last clue, the fact that all of the murders occurred at the same time, around 1 a.m., convinced Ben that the killer got off work from a hospital at midnight. Even though there were many hospitals in Boston, he became fixated on BGH because it was the one that treated the homeless, the indigent, the illegal immigrants, and the prostitutes. His colleagues, even his partner Neal Simpson, had thought that he had committed the cardinal sin of the detective, namely falling in love with his own theory. But Ben had

persisted and, on his own, had interviewed the 41 male employees of the Boston General Hospital between the ages of 18 and 50 who got off work near midnight.

Alfred Garussi didn't make much of an impression when Ben began the interrogation, although he did fit the profile: rather placid looking overweight single male, age 33, dressed plainly, lived alone, mid-level job as a surgical nurse. As usual, Ben made sure to stand up and display his full height to the suspect when he entered the makeshift interview room at the hospital. He shook Alfred's hand warmly, apologized with apparent sincerity for inconveniencing him, and promised that the interview wouldn't take long. He asked Alfred to address him as Mister Kaplan, and began by asking him questions about his education. Catholic schools and a nursing degree from Northeastern. His family life? Father dead for years, no siblings, a mother to whom he professed devotion. His idea of a good time? Birdwatching was his single passion, besides his work, and he was an active member of a Baptist church in Dedham. This interested Ben.

"Why did you leave the Catholic church?" he asked.

"Not enough Bible," was Alfred's terse response.

"But why go all the way to Dedham for church?"

"The people are nice." When Alfred's car broke down, which was often, someone from the Church would pick him up.

"What do you think of the sermons?"

"They're good," Alfred explained. "Reverend Fisk can be inspiring. I don't agree with everything he says. But I still like the services."

"What don't you agree with?"

“Well, I think his descriptions of Hell are a little, a little...” Alfred hesitated.

“Overblown?” Ben finished his sentence for him.

“Yeah,” Alfred said gratefully, “overblown.”

“So, you don’t quite agree with his eschatology?”

Again, Alfred was grateful, this time that Ben was treating him as an intellectual equal.

“I do, sort of, but I’m still not sure. But he’s dead-on right in his morality.”

“How so?”

“He’s strict, no nonsense. He has no time for liberals and relativists. Anything goes, that’s their motto. Everybody’s got their own values and no one’s better than anybody else, that’s what they think. Reverend Fisk says that right and wrong are objective, and they’re spelled out clear as day in the Bible and there’s no use in mincing words and pretending they’re not.”

Alfred was heating up, and so Ben egged him on.

“But are moral values really the same for everybody? What about a culture that’s totally different from yours? I’m Jewish, for example. My people don’t believe in Jesus Christ.”

“That’s okay, Mr. Kaplan. The Jews are special. They’re back in the Holy Land for a reason. They’re a good sign for the future. The second coming,” Alfred said a bit sheepishly. “Reverend Fisk leads tour groups to Israel every summer. If I can ever save up enough money, I’m going to go with him.”

“Okay Alfred, what about this. Suppose there’s a peaceful society somewhere in the South Pacific. People are nice to each other and there’s no crime or violence. But the

women don't cover their breasts. That would be counted as morally offensive here, but not there. Doesn't that suggest that values are relative?"

"Absolutely not. Women should keep themselves clothed no matter where they live. The body is the sacred vessel of the soul, sin is sin, and bare chests are sinful. Those people in the South Pacific are barbarians."

"And how about the way women dress here in Boston? I bet you see some pretty nasty women at your hospital."

"Yes, I do."

"What sort of women?"

"Oh, you know. Street people."

"Prostitutes?"

"Yes. They come to BGH because it's free."

"Harlots?"

"Yes."

"Dirty whores?"

"Exactly."

"They get treated on the tax-payer's dollar."

"Right."

"Hard-working stiff's like me and you pay for their medical care while they're walking the streets half-naked."

"Dirty whores," he nodded in agreement.

"And what about some of the nurses you work with? I bet some of the young ones are half-naked when they get back into their street clothes and leave the hospital."

“Absolutely. Some look like harlots themselves, Mr. Kaplan. It’s disgusting.”

Ben pounced. “And what sort of pornography do you watch?”

Alfred blushed and sputtered so badly that it took him a few seconds to respond. “I don’t watch any.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Garussi, but I had to ask,” Ben apologized.

Even though Garussi didn’t have a record and there was no physical evidence to connect him to the crime, within hours of having interviewed him, Ben could think of no one else. On the Sunday after the interview he actually went to the Dedham Baptist Church. He didn’t see Alfred, but he did pay close attention to Reverend Fisk’s sermon. Just as Alfred had described, the well-groomed and youthful minister, whose hair and smile both seemed perfect, breathed a bit of fire as he denounced the liberal intellectuals, those who lived just a few miles away in Cambridge and Boston, for having lost all sense of Right and Wrong. He became particularly incensed when he got to the topic of gay marriage. If men can marry men, he argued, then why shouldn’t they be able to marry boys? Why shouldn’t they be allowed to have sex with horses? Reverend Fisk had his audience in the palm of his hand, and even though Ben was repulsed by the crude sentiments he espoused, he had to admire the man’s rhetorical power.

That Sunday night Ben slept unusually well, for five hours straight, and Garussi appeared in a dream. He was in a suit and he seemed to be lecturing in Harvard Yard. On what subject, Ben did not know. When he awoke, Alfred Garussi became not only Ben’s prime, but his only, suspect.

Because he was working on conviction alone, Ben was neither angry nor surprised when no one in his unit would assist him in tailing Alfred. So after getting the

green light from Captain O'Toole, who had long ago learned to give Ben Kaplan free rein on an investigation, he did it on his own. Night after night he'd wait for Alfred to leave the hospital at midnight and get into his battered gray Toyota Camry. For five weeks, he went straight home to his small apartment in Somerville, and even Ben began to wonder whether he had become obsessed with the wrong man. One night, however, Alfred didn't go home. Instead, he drove from the hospital to what had been known as the Combat Zone, the notorious red-light district of Boston. Only a few remnants of it remained, the rest having been demolished and replaced by miniature skyscrapers and upscale restaurants, but there were still a couple of corners where working women plied their trade. Sure enough, Alfred solicited a prostitute, a tall black woman. She got into his car and they drove off.

Ben's heart began to beat hard, and a few beads of sweat appeared on his brow. Was this the perp, or was Alfred just a lonely man seeking a much needed release, an urge Ben understood all too well? Alfred drove through Chinatown and stopped his car in a deserted lot next to a Big Dig construction site. Ben parked a hundred feet away and took out his small pair of binoculars. In the darkness he couldn't see well, but he was pretty sure that Alfred gave the woman some cash and then began to grope her. But after that he couldn't make out what was going on between the two intertwined bodies as they slumped down into the seats of the car. Ben was tempted to wait, for he was far from sure what was going on in the Toyota, but he couldn't afford to. He rushed the car, pistol drawn, and dragged Alfred Garussi out of the car.

As he had in the interview, Alfred began to stutter so badly that he couldn't get a sentence out clearly. But the woman was altogether clear: "oh you shitass mothefucker

honky cop! What you gotta bust me for? I'm just trying to make a living. Shitass cop!" she kept repeating, a phrase Ben hadn't heard before.

Alfred Garussi had two blades in his pocket: a large hunting knife and small surgical scalpel. Still, the case against him was circumstantial, for he had not drawn these weapons and he claimed that he had taken the scalpel home by mistake. If he hadn't cracked he might even have beaten the rap. But Alfred had told all after being interrogated for a couple of hours. Pretending to be one of those liberal moral relativists Alfred despised, Ben had relentlessly goaded his suspect. He derided all moral absolutes, argued that only chicken-shit cowards believed in God, and proclaimed vociferously that all human beings were equal.

"We're all in the same boat, Alfred. Doesn't matter if you're a Christian or a pagan or a heathen. Or even a Jew. Doesn't even matter if you have sex with horses. We're pathetic little beings in a universe that doesn't care a bit about us, and all we do, with out little value systems, our religions, our nice little Churches, our big bad Bible, is defend ourselves against the abyss. You know what the abyss is, don't you Alfred? Nothingness. That's reality. Come on, don't tell me you never worried that everything your Reverend Fisk has told you is total bullshit."

"It's not bs, Mr. Kaplan. What's written in the Bible is true. Sin is sin and must be stamped out."

"And is prostitution a sin, Alfred?"

"Yes it is, Mr. Kaplan, and I'm ashamed of what I did. I'm weak and I will beg the good Lord for forgiveness. I'm flesh and bones, and I'm a sinner. I'm disgusting. But the good Lord will forgive me."

“What sin did you commit, Alfred.”

“Fornication.”

“Is that the only one?”

“No. You were right. I do watch dirty movies when I’m home alone.”

“And do you masturbate?”

Alfred looked defeated. “Yes.”

“Does it feel good?”

“No,” Alfred shook his head wearily.

“Why not?”

“Because it’s dirty. It’s disgusting.”

“Why is it disgusting? You’re a lonely man who has urges. What’s wrong with that?” Ben said softly and sympathetically.

“I should control the desires of the flesh. You know I should. But I can’t.”

“And the dirty whores who come to your hospital just make you feel worse, don’t they?” he said even more gently.

“Yes.”

“And what about the nurses, the harlots who leave work half-naked? They make you feel bad too, don’t they?”

“Yes,” Alfred confessed.

“Temptresses?”

“Yes.”

“They make you feel weak at the knees, don’t they? Did you ever hear of the Myth of Tantalus, Alfred?”

“No.”

“Tantalus was a bad guy who was punished for eternity. He was in Hell and was always hungry and thirsty. And right in front of him was beautiful fruit and ice-cold water. But they were always just slightly out of his reach. That was his punishment: seeing what he wanted but not being able to reach out and get it.”

“Uh-huh.”

“That’s where we get the word ‘tantalize,’ you know.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Well, now you do. The women tantalize you, don’t they Alfred?”

“Yes, Mr. Kaplan, that’s exactly what they do.”

“So why don’t you ask one of them out for a date?”

“I couldn’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“They’re whores.”

“So what do you do?”

“I go home.”

“And watch your movies?”

“Yes.”

“And that just makes you feel worse?”

“Yes.”

“And then after a while you go to a whore, and try to get it out of your system.”

“Yes.”

“And you hurt them, don’t you?”

Alfred Garussi began his confession.

And so after years of struggling like everyone else to find a parking space, Ben Kaplan finally had his very own. The mayor publicly thanked him for exemplary service, and the next day a sign went up directly in front of his building: ***Reserved for Boston Police Vehicles Only***. All the cops on the force knew which spot on Commonwealth belonged to Ben. Only one person in his building protested, an aging professor of sociology at Harvard who lived with his cat on the floor above Ben. One morning when Ben was getting into his car the professor, short and tweedy and exuding self-importance, unleashed a tirade at him, protesting vehemently that it wasn't fair that the choice spot that everyone in the building craved belonged to a cop. Ben smiled gently and told the man he was free to lodge a complaint with the Police. He jotted down the telephone number at the station, handed it to him, and drove away. And whatever bit of guilt Ben had felt at having such a special privilege faded more quickly than he would have predicted.

I.2

Ben's car, a dull green Volvo stationwagon, freckled with dents, had over 200,000 miles on it and was the last remnant of his marriage. Twenty years ago, when Miriam moved to Manhattan with their two boys, the car was new and she wanted no part of it. They had bought it when the boys were tiny and they lived in Jamaica Plain, for they had wanted a car that could compete in a collision with something driven by one of the drunken college kids who fly around Boston late at night. They never had that collision in their automobile, although they couldn't say the same about their marriage, so they never found out whether the car was as safe as it was cracked up to be. Ben knew that he should have gotten rid of it after he and Miriam split up, and after he moved into the Back Bay. But he'd grown attached to it. And Arman, the mechanic who took care of it for him, had become a pal. Ben calculated that with all the repairs he had paid for, he had probably put Arman's kids through college, and that was just fine with him.

Traffic was minimal at that time of the morning, so Ben made it to the South End in 10 minutes. When he got to Washington Street, the baseball field of the little park was blocked off with yellow tape. There were three cruisers, six or seven uniforms, an ambulance, and the forensics truck, but not Neal's Honda. "*Hot damn,*" he thought, "*I beat him.*"

The uniforms let him walk onto the field without having to show his badge. The ambulance guys were eager to bag the stiff, and so they were happy to see him.

"Ben, how are ya?" Chuck bellowed as he rushed up to Ben his hand extended for a shake. His blue eyes sparkled in gladness, although Ben had no idea why. "Long time

no see, old buddy! Business has been slow, I guess. Routine homicide, Ben, don't worry. White guy, mid-thirties, probably rich, bullet through his heart killed him quick. We found the casing: .22 caliber. Must've been a robbery gone bad. Some bad dude whips out his piece, forces him into the park, asks for his wallet, doesn't get it fast enough and blows his cool. Shoots him through the heart. Grabs his briefcase, his cell, his Blackberry, whatever it was he was carrying, and then peeled out. Too bad he got the heart. Poor bastard. Rich guy, probably's here with his wife, making good money. Probably high-tech, don't you think Ben? I think so. Bad luck. Poor bastard. Probably find the perp in the projects down the street, don't you think so Ben? You should look there first."

Chuck could chatter on like this forever. He wasn't the type to notice that Ben had no interest in his theory.

"When did he die Chuck?"

"Last night, maybe 10, 11. Not too late. Body was discovered early this morning by a woman walking her dog. Funny kind of dog. Fancy. The kind that retrieves croissants. Mix of a poodle and something else." Chuck paused to think. "What do you call those dogs? Chuck paused again, his heavy white head tilted slightly upwards. "Labrador! Labradoodles! Woman was walking a fucking Labradoodle...who sniffed the stiff." He grinned in pride. "She called 911, and me and the boys were right on it. Where you been Ben? We've been here for an hour already. What took you so long?"

"Sally wanted me to get my beauty rest. Didn't want to wake me."

"What a bitch. Anyway, the body's waiting for you," Chuck said, cocking his head to the right. "In the dugout."

This was a first. Ben never had seen a dead body in a dugout before. Except maybe Bill Buckner after he lost the World Series for the Sox in 86. The ball, a slow grounder, went right through his legs and when it dribbled into the outfield it took with it the life of not only that belonging to the sorrowful first-baseman but also that of every citizen of Red Sox nation. They lost to the Mets that year and the infamous curse that had hung over the team since they had sold Babe Ruth to the Yankees in 1920 became more real even to those few fans not given to superstition.

“I gotta go, Ben,” Chuck said. “Anyway, you got what I can give you. White guy dead for 8 hours or so. Shot through the heart. Slug’s probably still in there. Killed damn close to instantly. I’m outta here.”

“Hold on Chuck,” Ben said. “Any signs of struggle? Was he dragged dead into the dugout, or was he shot right there?”

“Probably right there. No evidence of anything else. Anyway, here’s the polaroid. Enjoy. Hey, you watch the game last night? Nice one. Beat Texas.”

“Yeah, it was good. Thanks for your help Chuck,” Ben said. “Thanks for leaving,” is what he thought. And he wondered: what drew the poor bastard into the park, and then into the dugout of a little league baseball field? Had the bad guy pulled the piece and forced him in? It was dark in there, he wanted privacy to do his evil deed and even on a warm July evening, when there surely would have been people in the park, the dugout would have given him just that.

With Chuck finally gone, Ben had a chance to look at the corpse himself. He walked onto the baseball field, and then down the steps into the sunken, ramshackle structure that passed as a dugout. Sprawled on the dirt floor, the stiff was as advertised.

Typical South End gentry. Cuffed khakis, blue Lands End polo shirt with a darkened hole right through the pocket. Scuffed white running shoes. Straight, thick light brown hair draping his face. On the verge of needing a shave. Average height bordering on chubby. Nice, intelligent face: soft, a little fleshy, placid. He was sprawled on his back with his arms and legs stretched out wide, looking just like a kid making an angel in the snow. He looked like a gentle man and just as Chuck had said, he was probably 35 or so.

Looking at his still, silent face, Ben thought for a moment of his own sons. David was 22, just graduated from Trinity College in Hartford, and was somewhere in Mexico building houses for poor people. Paul was 25, a poor person himself, living in Brooklyn. He had never made it through college but he called himself a writer. Ben hadn't seen Paul in a few years, and David only at his graduation, but their mother, his ex-wife Miriam, had, as always, kept him posted.

Miriam had figured out early in their marriage that Ben, through no fault he could overcome, wasn't fit to be a husband or a father, but would do fine when he had the distance of an ex, and so they got divorced when the boys were 5 and 2. She moved back to New York and got remarried quickly to Alan, a fellow lawyer who worked in her office. Miriam had done well, as far as Ben could tell, and had never born him any ill will, even when she was a single mother with two small children. In fact, she, who knew his fears well, had called him just a couple of days ago to reassure him that his boys were fine.

Miriam had been right to dump him. The boys didn't seem to miss him much, but they always knew he was a guy with good intentions who'd be there if needed. Problem was, he wasn't needed much. And when Miriam married Alan, he wasn't needed at all.

Since two lawyers made a lot more money than a single cop, he didn't even have to send any checks, though he regularly did so once a month. He insisted on paying half of David's college tuition. He had tried to convince Paul to let him pay for a health insurance policy, but his older son refused.

But this stiff didn't resemble either of Ben's sons. He had a clean, innocent look and he was quite a bit shorter. His hair was straight, theirs curly. And neither of his sons would be caught dead in cuffed khakis. Or so he guessed.

This dead guy made Ben sad. He was wearing a wedding ring, and had the feel of a family man. When Ben looked at him he imagined two little kids, gender unknown, rushing to greet him when he came home from a long day at the office. They were screaming madly, "Daddy's home, Daddy's home," the way Ben's sons had once screamed madly for him. In fact, this had actually happened only a very few times, since Ben had almost never come home when they were still awake. And he had never felt comfortable when they hugged his long legs.

Ben was confident that the dead white guy in the South End was a man who was needed at home. The first thing to do, then, was to check with Missing Persons. Ben told a uniform to make the call.

"Ben, you son of a gun! You beat me here!"

"Of course I did. I'm faster than you. And a better detective. But you're better looking, Neal, I'll give you that."

Neal Simpson, Ben's partner for the last 5 years, approached him. He was a black man, a little shorter than average in height, a little heavier in weight. His mustache was neatly trimmed, his face bordered on the jovial, and his bright eyes radiated energy.

"What's up with the stiff, Ben?" Neal asked.

"Dead 8 hours. Looks like a local. Probably lives close by. Most of those buildings across the street are condos. I've got a call into Missing Persons."

Neal took a look at the corpse. "Damn. In a dugout. Tell me more Ben."

"One shot, .22 caliber, through the heart. Forensics thinks that he died instantly. No wallet or briefcase, no phone. But he still has his crummy watch. Casio. Doctor Chuck tells me it was a robbery gone bad."

Neal laughed. "And Chuckles would know. How'd he get into the dugout? Dragged?"

"Doesn't look like it," Ben said. Even though Chuck had assured him that the body hadn't been dragged, Ben had checked out the ground carefully himself. But he wanted to do it again. "Let's you and me and a few of these uniforms take another good look around, Neal," he suggested.

"Okay, Ben."

The small troop of cops started to comb the baseball field and within minutes a uniform found an empty black backpack near first base. But that was it. The white guy had been killed, as far as they could all tell, right where he had been found.

Poor bastard.

The ambulance guys bagged the stiff, and drove off with him. Ben lit cigarette number two, and Neal gave him the look that said, “how can a smart guy like you be so stupid?” A look Ben chose to ignore.

Neal Simpson was in his early thirties. He had graduated from the University of Massachusetts in Boston, and then went directly to the police academy, a move that seemed strange for someone whose ambitions were as close to the surface as Neal’s. Having been asked many times why he did this instead of going to Law School, Neal always gave the stock reply: “I want to give something back to the community, and what better way to do it than by being on the street as a cop.” He never denied that he wanted to ascend the ladder of power, but he often claimed, disingenuously, that the action of the street didn’t appeal to him much. He was currently studying for his sergeant’s exam, which he knew he would pass, and then he hoped, or planned, to make it to Lieutenant, then Captain. He confided to Ben that he thought he could do this by 40. If he needed to, he could get a law degree at night school. He then would be positioned to run for office.

Neal was well aware of both the pitfalls and the advantages of being black, and he never downplayed either. His car had been pulled over by his fellow-cops too many times to deny the former, but he also knew the Boston Police Department wanted qualified blacks higher up in the power structure. How far up the ladder extended he wasn’t quite sure, but he planned to find out.

Even though Ben wouldn’t have dreamed of telling him, Neal was the best partner he had ever had. Meticulous, loyal, punctual, energetic and smart, he liked to talk but was willing to listen. Neal was more intelligent than most cops, and had plenty of self-

confidence, but he recognized the value of Ben's experience and so tried to learn as much as he could from his partner. He was married to a physician's assistant named Alice, and they had a two-year old named Derrick.

"Should we canvass the projects, Ben? Find out who was in the park last night."

"Nah, let the uniforms do that. Let's wait and see if Missing Persons tells us anything. This doesn't seem like a robbery to me."

"Why?"

"Come on, this guy wouldn't rendezvous with a gang-banger in a dark park, in a dugout."

"But the perp could have pulled a gun on him on the street and told him to head into the park."

"Maybe. But I don't think that's what happened. Bit too choreographed. Perp interested in the wallet and briefcase would just pull the gun and get it on the spot."

"Washington Street's pretty busy."

Just then a uniform came over and told them that someone had indeed just called in a missing person. A woman named Fern Mortensen. She lived next to the park, on Washington Street, and when she awoke at 6:00 to find her husband gone she had called the police. Without needing to say anything to each other, Ben and Neal crossed the street and headed over to the Mortensen apartment.

"You watch the game last night, Neal?" Ben asked. "Red Sox took it 10 to 9. Manny had a three-run homer. Damon hit a solo in the top of the ninth to seal it."

"Yeah, so I heard. I was too busy watching the Yankees lose to Tampa Bay."

The only blemish on Neal Simpson's record, by Ben's lights, was the satellite dish he had bought so that he could watch his beloved baseball team. Even though he had grown up in Roxbury, as a kid he had decided go his own way and to latch on to a winner rather than suffer endlessly with the Sox. Ben had explained to Neal more than once what a bad decision he had made. Especially before they had won the World Series the previous year, Ben had lectured Neal about the tragic beauty of the Red Sox, the strangely dignified virtue of losing, and the nobility of suffering. None of it made the slightest impression on Neal, who remained steadfast. Now that the tables had been turned, and the Red Sox had finally vanquished the Yankees in the extraordinary American League Playoff series of 2004, coming from three games behind to win four in a row, an unprecedented achievement, Ben's devotion to his boyhood team had lessened.

Ben had advised Neal to keep his baseball loyalties to himself, but his partner ignored him and would even wear a Yankee cap to work once in a while. But Neal was brilliant in turning the abuse he received from his fellow cops to his advantage. When the New Yorkers won year after year, he didn't lord it over the others, and somehow he made his Yankee commitment seem like an accidental windfall rather than a calculated decision. Neal made good jokes about himself and was gracious when his team lost in 2004. Even the Irish cops from Southie didn't resent him.

"Have an okay night last night, Ben?" Neal asked gently, as they were walking to the Mortensen place.

"Not too bad," he replied, and Neal knew he should drop the subject. The two detectives rarely talked about personal matters. Neal had confided in Ben about his

political ambitions, and shared stories about Derrick, and Ben had reciprocated with a few stories about his insomnia.

“How about you?”

“Great. It was a beautiful evening yesterday, and so Alice and I took a nice slow jog after dinner. Derrick loves his new stroller. We took turns pushing it.”

“One of those three-wheelers you can run with, right?”:

“Yup. A Bentley. Twenty inch wheels, excellent brake, very light weight. You can push it without feeling a thing. Didn’t get the racing wheels, though. We went with mountain because we use it in the park sometimes.”

“That must be nice, running with your family.”

“It’s excellent.”

“We didn’t have such strollers when my boys were little.”

“Progress, Ben, progress.”

Ben smirked. “You call high-tech strollers progress?”

“Of course it’s progress. Just a small step, obviously, but an improvement.”

“Improvement,” Ben smirked again.

“What do you have against technological progress, Ben? You read the newspaper on your computer, you’d be lost without your cell phone. Damn, you drive a car. That’s an improvement over the horse and buggy, isn’t it?”

“Yes it is. Just don’t leave out weapons-grade anthrax, global warming and nuclear annihilation when you’re making your list, okay?”

“They’re just tools, Ben. They can be used for good or evil. Just because a tool can be used for rotten purposes doesn’t mean that it’s rotten. It’s still powerful and can be put to good use. Whether it will be or not is up to the person using it.”

“But what if the whole world becomes a tool, Neal? What if they turn us all into tools? What then?”

Before Neal could answer the two detectives realized that they were standing in front of Fern Mortensen’s building.

The lobby they entered looked industrial and except for the brand new, space-age telephone system connected to the apartments didn't suggest much about the people living there. Neal dialed up the Mortensens. A woman's voice answered.

"Who is it?"

"The police, Mrs. Mortensen. I'm detective Simpson and I'm with my partner Detective Kaplan."

"Why should I believe you?"

"Would you like our badge numbers?"

"Yes, I would."

"OK. It's BPD, 1836."

"What should I do next? Call the police station?"

"Yes, Ma'am. Ask them where detectives Simpson and Kaplan are at this moment. They'll tell you it's us."

"Cautious woman," Neal ventured. "Maybe she's had some nasty experiences in this neighborhood. Or maybe she's in the middle of one now."

"Maybe."

The two cops waited for two or three minutes. Ben could imagine Sally stretching her fleshy arm to pick up the phone. Zaftig, pleasantly plump, totally sexy, that's what Sally was.

Finally, Fern Mortensen returned to the speaker and said that she would buzz them in, that her apartment was 418.

The large doors vibrated when the lock released, and Ben and Neal walked down a long hall, utterly blank, with large, blue metal doors on each side. They reached the elevator and went up to the fourth floor, again to be greeted by a row of blue metal doors. When they got to 418, Neal knocked. The woman who opened the door was just a bit above short. Luxuriously thick, jet black curly hair draped her head. Her rimless glasses were without style, but they couldn't conceal the beauty of her olive skinned face. She was wearing gym clothes, which revealed strong shapely legs, wonderfully compact breasts, and tautly muscled arms. This was a woman who worked out hard. No make-up. Nice, soft lips. Thick eyebrows atop eyes that showed nothing whatsoever.

Ben towered above her and made her look like a child, but she and Neal looked just right standing next to each other.

Fern gestured the detectives in, but stopped their entry in the hall and didn't offer them a place to sit. Ben took a quick peek at the apartment. The nondescript lobby hadn't prepared them for what they would find inside. The place was huge, and had windows 10 feet high. One framed the soaring profile of the Hancock Center, looming like a distant mountain peak. The hardwood floors were brightly polished. There seemed to be small rooms scattered about a large living room. The kitchen was in a corner, its cabinets bright white, its stove large and silver, a professional model. But the furniture in the living room was all junk, like the stuff you'd find in a graduate student's apartment. A few pieces of art were on the wall, and some pottery was scattered around, which Ben guessed was Mexican. He would find later that he was right about that.

He was right about something else as well. Two small children, girls, probably 4 and 2, were standing shyly behind their mother's legs. Ben's heart sank.

“Mrs. Mortensen, I’m Detective Simpson and this...”

“Yes, I know, Detective Kaplan. You already told me that. Why are you here? My husband’s dead, isn’t he?”

Ben was shocked, and not just because she said this in front of her children. But he recovered quickly.

“Why do you ask that, Mrs. Mortensen?” he asked.

“What do you think I am, stupid? He didn’t come home, you’re here. You found him, didn’t you. Is he hurt? Is he dead? Is he gone? Where is he? Where is my husband?”

“We’re not sure yet, Mrs. Mortensen,” Neal said. “Do you have a picture of him?”

“Emma,” she barked to her older daughter. “You know the picture on Mommy’s dresser in her bedroom? The one with Mommy and Daddy at their wedding? Go get that for me, would you?”

The little girl, eager to please, scampered down the hall. In a flash she was back, holding the framed photograph in her little right hand. She gave it to her mother, who handed it to Neal.

The picture was more than flattering. Fern’s face was exploding with a huge smile that seemed genuinely happy. She glowed like a movie-star. She wasn’t wearing her glasses, and her black curls cascaded down her neck, perfectly framing her lovely face. Fern had a Mediterranean look and the man next to her was the stiff. His serene, bright, serious face seemed to express great confidence in his decision to partner with the absolutely beautiful woman next to him. His eyes, however, didn’t really seem to be focusing on Fern but rather to be laughing at a joke he had just told himself.

Neal showed Fern the polaroid of the corpse and said, “I’m sorry, Mrs. Mortensen, but is this your husband?”

She didn’t react. She had already seemed shell-shocked when they had walked in, and her eyes remained frozen when Neal said those words to her. Ben tried hard to read something on her face, but came up blank. As blank as she.

“That’s Brian. He called. Last night. Around 10. Said he just got off the train and that he’d be home soon. I fell asleep. I was so tired. I went to the gym while Zina was here in the morning. She’s our nanny. She’s getting her Master’s in child psychology. she had to do something after lunch so I spent the whole afternoon and evening taking care of the children. Kate’s been sick, and so she was cranky. I didn’t get them both down until nearly 9. I was so tired, but I tried to stay awake. When Brian called I may have been abrupt with him. He works so late, you know, and I hardly see him. He hardly sees the girls. But he almost always has breakfast with them. He likes to make them pancakes. Anyway, Brian said he’d be home soon, that he’d just gotten off the T. He always enjoys the walk between the T stop and here. Takes the Red Line to Park, then the Green to Copley, then walks home. He says it calms him down. Sometimes he walks all the way from Park Street, which I told him over and over again might be dangerous. Dozens of times. I told him to take cabs. We can afford it, you know.” She hissed these last words.

“But Brian never listened to me. So he was killed on his way home. Is that what happened to my husband Detective?”

“We don’t know what happened, Mrs. Mortensen. His body was found in the park across the street. In the dugout of the baseball field there.”

At first she didn't react, her entire body motionless, her gaze undirected. Neal and Ben couldn't take their eyes off her until she snapped back and barked at them, "how did he get in there? Even Brian wasn't stupid enough to wander around the park at night."

And then Fern Mortensen started to gently weep. Each of her daughters had a tight grip on one of her legs. They both looked as shell-shocked as their mother, but she seemed unaware of their presence.

"Mrs. Mortensen, where did your husband work?" Neal asked quietly.

She looked him straight in the eye. "Elpigen," she grunted through her tears. "In Kendall Square." After a moment's pause, when she again seemed to leave this planet and entirely lose focus, she asked, "What should I do? Can I see him? Do I have to answer your questions?"

"Mommy," Emma asked, "where's Daddy?"

"Daddy's dead, Emma. He's not coming home anymore." Then she turned to Ben and nearly shouted, "Get out of here, would you? I've got to be with my children. I've got to take care of them and you're not helping me, not one bit. Give me a call or something when you figure out what I'm supposed to do. But just go away, go away now."

"Mrs. Mortensen," Neal said, "is there anyone who would want to hurt your husband?"

"Hurt him? No, why would anyone want to hurt him. He was just a scientist, for God's sake. He spent his life looking at molecules on a computer screen. He didn't have any enemies. How could he? He didn't have much of a life besides his work."

“Nothing unusual happened yesterday, Mrs. Mortensen?” Neal persisted. “Strange telephone call, strange person? Did you see anybody around your house you didn’t recognize?”

“Stop asking me all these stupid questions! He was killed by a mugger, or something like that. There are housing projects all around us. He didn’t have any enemies.”

“Did your husband carry a briefcase, Mrs. Mortensen?”

“Never. Always a backpack. A black one. EMS. He kept his laptop in it.”

“Mrs. Mortensen,” Ben asked, “is there anyone who can stay with you? Is there anybody you’d like us to call?”

“What do you mean? Like my mother?” she snarled. “Or maybe you have my father in mind. Should I call them? Or how about Brian’s parents in California? They’re both doctors, you know. They’ll know what to do, right?”

Ben wanted to say, “geez, lady, we’re only trying to help out a little bit,” but of course he held his tongue. Poor woman was a goner, and who could blame her for that.

“What about a friend or a neighbor?” Neal asked.

She snarled at him too: “I don’t have any friends. And I don’t know my neighbors. And I want you to know that I’m perfectly capable of taking care of my own affairs. And my children. I can call their nanny if I need some help. She’s getting her Master’s degree and she’s always glad to make a little extra cash. So don’t worry about me. Just leave.”

“Mrs. Mortensen, if there’s anything you need, anybody you want us to contact, anything at all, just give me a call. My cell phone number’s on the card.”

“I know. I can read.” She looked at Ben uncomprehendingly. Her eyes, flush with tears, showed nothing but irritation. She was a beautiful woman who didn’t look beautiful at all.

“Get out, please, just get out.”

“Okay, Mrs. Mortensen. I’m sorry, but you’re going to have to come down to the morgue later today to identify the body. A police officer will call you and drive you over there, okay? Do you have a cell, or should we call at home?”

“Call me at home,” she said.

“Okay, Mrs. Mortensen. I’m very sorry for your loss.”

She didn’t respond.

“Coffee, right?” Neal asked.

“Right, coffee.”

“Probably a Starbucks nearby.”

“Good guess,” Ben sarcastically. “There’s one a couple of blocks from here.”

“Walk or drive?”

“Walk.”

“It might be crowded.”

“It might.”

Because it was nearly 9, and the high-end achievement crowd had already juiced up and gone to work, the Starbucks wasn’t crowded after all, and so Ben, a small regular coffee, and Neal, a medium skim-latte, got a table. As usual, Ben had trouble fitting his large frame on a chair too small for him. As usual, he pushed the chair to the side so that

his legs wouldn't have to remain immobile under the table. He knew he would obstruct other coffee-drinkers on their way to caffeine salvation, but he was ready to move when they needed him to.

For Ben, his job had just begun. Because now he had to tell a story. The Brian Mortensen story. He had to figure out the beginning and the middle: Brian Mortensen's corpse had given him the ending. Ben's job was to flesh the whole thing out, figure out what would possibly drive someone to shoot a fellow human being in the chest with a .22. The story had to make sense. After all, it had really happened. Someone had already blown a fellow human being's heart into shreds, and there had to be a reason.

So, Neal began his first round of speculation. "I hate to say it, but Chuckles might be right. The projects are close, 10 at night, walking alone. No phone or computer or wallet. Robbery gone bad. Or, maybe a junkie who plugged him just because his finger was itching."

"Maybe," Ben replied. "But how'd a junkie manage to get him into the park? And then into a dugout?"

"Junkie was waiting in the park for someone to walk by. When he saw Brian, he came out, waved the gun in his face, scared the bejeezus out of him, maybe promised him that he wouldn't hurt him. Brian's a softie, a high tech kid from California who moved to Boston to work for big bucks in the pharmaceutical business. These techies are people-stupid, Ben. They know how to read computer screens, but they can't read faces. Brian couldn't tell the guy was raging stoned, and so when the junkie said *march*, Brian marched. Man, he must have been surprised when the guy plugged him."

“Maybe. But Washington’s a pretty busy street. Why would he be doing business there?”

“Park was dark, and he knew nobody would be on the baseball field.”

“I don’t know. Takes a lot of patience to wait for the right target. And, according to you, the junkie would have to react very quickly. See Brian walk by, size him up, jump out and push him in. Maybe our junkie is super people-smart, but I don’t know. It doesn’t sound right, Neal.”

“Junkie wasn’t super people-smart either, Ben. Just lucky. Maybe he went into the park to pee. Saw Brian walk by, zipped up his fly—or maybe not—and jumped him. Let’s ask forensics to look for urine, Ben. I’ll bet we find some newly dried pee sample. We’ll DNA him up, and be done with this one by *mañana*.”

“A pee sample? Hmmm....never thought of that. Not a bad idea, Neal. *You* call Doctor Chuckles, okay?”

“Oh, he’s gonna be pissed.” Neal laughed. “He’s not going to want to come back here. Besides, can you really sweep for pee?”

“Of course you can’t,” Ben said, and then immediately reprimanded himself for having taken his partner seriously. But since Neal had gotten him fair and square, he decided to be a graceful loser. “That’s like saying we’d sweep for germs. Unless you found a nice little puddle of pee, you’re out of luck.”

“Okay, no puddle of pee for me, Ben. What’d you think of Fern?”

“Crazy-athlete. Control freak. Probably can’t tolerate an ounce of fat on her body.”

“Real good looking, though. Think she works?”

“Not full-time. But she’s well educated. Maybe a scientist herself.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Same thing you said about Brian: she’s not exactly a people-person. She didn’t even seem to know those two little girls were standing next to her. And those eyes—they were looking nowhere.”

“Yeah, she was gone. Can’t blame her, though. She’s in shock. Her husband was just killed.”

“Right.”

“So we should go back to the scene and see how the uniforms are doing?”

“Let me finish my coffee, for Christ’s sake,” Ben said. He immediately regretted having taken the name of his partner’s Lord in vain. “They probably won’t turn up a thing. We’ll have to go back to the station, check the data-bases for who’s up and around in the projects. And we can ask Willie if he knows anything.”

“Let’s call Willie first. The cops will keep working.”

“Okay,” Ben said, but he didn’t make a move towards his cell phone. Instead, he stared into his cup for a moment and then harshly massaged his eyes with his left hand. When he was done he looked dazed and puzzled, as if he didn’t know where he was. But he quickly returned to himself and exhaled a sigh of relief. Neal got the message and so pulled out his own phone. The cops were in luck: the call had awakened Willie McGee at home and he was willing to meet them at their usual place.

“He’s there, Ben; let’s roll.”

“Nah, let’s wait a few minutes. It’ll take him a while to get there.”

Neal had to admit this was true. There was time, therefore, for a second round of the blessed bean.

Willie McGee was the cops' best source of information for this part of town. After spending a couple of years in prison for robbery, he was trying to go straight. Or so he said. He had moved in with his grandmother, and was taking night courses at Roxbury Tech to prepare for the real estate agent's licencing exam. He had dreams of making it big in Boston's still soaring housing market, but Ben sniffed a tragedy in the making. He could imagine Willie, far from stupid but a bumbler, getting his license just as the real estate bubble burst, and old Willie, seemingly doomed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, trying to make money when there was none to be made. Ben was convinced the market was going to collapse. Indeed, he thought the whole economy was going to collapse. Ben even worried about Neal, who had just bought a large and brand new condo in Jamaica Plain, and was mortgaged up to his eyebrows.

Despite his good intentions and plans for a new future, gregarious Willie McGee still spent a good bit of his time hanging out with his old friends on the street, so he was usually abreast of current events and always glad to make a few bucks off of Neal and Ben for telling them what he knew. And Willie knew a lot.

"I was asleep."

"Bullshit, Willie," Neal replied.

"Well, I wasn't exactly sleeping. I got trouble falling asleep most nights. Stay up tossing and turning all hours. But I was in bed, you gotta believe me, Detective Simpson. I went to bed at midnight. In my crib. I mean, my apartment."

“It’s not actually yours, is it Willie? It’s your grandmother’s, right?”

“I pay my share of the rent. Anyway, like I said, I got back from class and went right to my bed. Did some reading before I crashed. ‘Principles of Marketing.’ That shit’s slick.”

“So you don’t know anything about a white guy getting popped in the park on Washington Street last night? Some time between 10 and midnight. ”

“No sir, not a thing.”

Willie McGee was slightly built, his hair was closely cropped, and he was wearing a bright blue Izod tee-shirt and a pair of tattered jeans. He had nervous eyes and found it difficult to stay still. He was talking to Neal and Ben in their usual meeting spot: a construction site near the projects. The very construction site where Alfred Garussi had dumped one of his bodies. Number three as Ben recalled.

“So nobody from your side of the street was working last night?” Ben asked.

“None I know of.”

“You’re bullshitting us, Willie,” Neal interjected. “Name your price, and don’t mess with us anymore.”

“Detective Simpson, do you think I would withhold on you? You don’t think my motives are mercenary, no do you?”

“Mr. McGee,” Ben said, with a hint of menace in his voice.

“Oh Lord, Detective Kaplan, do you think I’m withholding on you? Nothing could be further from the truth. You know that for a small fee I will tell you all I know.”

“Mr. McGee,” Ben said, “we understand that you’re a dedicated public servant. Name a fair price and we’ve got a deal.”

“For the one-time bargain basement price of a hundred square I’ll give you the name, and the address, of a young man who was indeed haunting the streets last night and most likely did perform some act of mischief. But I wasn’t lying to you. He don’t live in my side of the projects.”

The ritualized bargaining that preceded every session having been completed, Ben whipped out his wallet and handed over 5 twenties to his informant.

“Thank you sir,” Will said graciously. “When I got back from class I did stop and share a quick refreshment with some brothers, I mean colleagues, on the corner, in front of Ruben’s package store. They offered me a tasty brew and I couldn’t say no to that, could I? A student like myself feels a lot of stress and I needed to relax a moment before I returned to my studies. Learning all about appraisals and inspections and capital gains and lead paint removal, that shit’s complicated. But I gotta understand it. There’s a reason they call it *real* estate. It’s real, Detective, and I’m going get me a piece of that reality one day soon. They gonna gentrify this whole neighborhood and I’m going to be the point man for some big agency. I’m gonna be selling *condo-min-iums!*”

“You think rich white people are going to buy from you, Willie?” Neal asked.

“Oh hell yeah. If they want a touch of the urban scene then I’m their man. Plus I’m gonna learn how to talk right. I’m taking a course called ‘The Language of Real Estate.’ Gonna ace that mutthafuckin exam. Sorry. I’m gonna be wearing a nice suit. Have you thought about relocating Detective Kaplan? Or maybe an investment property? We’re sitting on a gold mine here in the South End.”

“We’re not sitting, Mr. McGee, we’re standing. And my feet are starting to hurt.”

“Sorry Detective Kaplan. Anyways, I come home and I’m wiped. Capital gains, variable rate mortgages, homeowner’s insurance. So a bit of time on the corner was good for my head.”

“When you’d get back from class Willie?” Neal gently asked.

“Approximately 9:30. p.m.”

“And you were in front of Ruben’s when you heard something.”

“Yeah, round midnight. Crackhead, real skinny and tall, so his street-name is String, short for Stringbean. Real name Winfred Bennett. What kind of name is Winfred? French? Damn if I know. No wonder he calls himself String. He was a good ballplayer once. Played for McKinley. Heard he was going to get a scholarship to some Division I school. Can’t remember which one. But he squandered his golden opportunity. Lost it all on the street. Like most of the other dumb-fucks who stand in front of Ruben’s.”

Ben recognized the name. He still followed Boston high-school basketball closely, especially McKinley High in Dorchester, for it was coached by an old friend, Bobby Doyle. He had roomed with Bobby during his two, unhappy years at Harvard. Both had been brought in to play basketball. Ben was a forward. Back then, there had been no distinctions between power or small. Bobby was a point-guard. He had been at McKinley for a long time, and he and Ben had remained close. And so Ben had heard the name Stringbean Bennett before.

“And what did String tell you last night?”

“Not much. But he was nervous. Aggravated. Or do I mean *agitated*. Yeah, agitated. But, then again, String’s always agitated. Anyway, he said he’d had a good night. Patted his backpack and looked real satisfied. Didn’t elaborate. Didn’t say much

of nothing, really. But we all knew he'd been up to no good. He works solo, don't hang out with no gangs. Takes down a car now and then. Preys on the unsuspecting who leave the restaurants in the South End. Or so I've been told. Never heard him do nothing violent. Your boy was plugged?"

“.22. In the heart.”

“Damn.” Willie paused shaking his head sadly and then continued, “Well, String always carries a big ugly back-pack. Some kid thing. Has pictures on it. What's the name of that cartoon dude? Spiderman! Old String carries around a Spiderman back-pack,” Willie chuckled. “Lord knows what was inside of it.”

“Big enough to hold a computer inside?”

“Hell yeah. Big enough to hold your mamma....I'm sorry, Detective, sorry sorry, sorry.”

“Old habits die hard, don't they Willie,” Neal said.

“That's the truth. I didn't mean to say nothing offensive, Detective Simpson. It just popped outta my mouth. Shit like that happens to me all the time. Oh shit, I gotta stop talking this way. After all, I'll be selling houses to white people soon. This neighborhood's gonna get gentrified, and I'm gonna be on the cutting edge. It won't happen again, I promise you. Sir.”

“And where does String live?”

“Ruggles. But he probably ain't there.”

“Where is he?”

“Probably at his girlfriend's place. Both of them crackheads. Too early for them to be on the move. They both stoned.”

“What’s her name? And where does she live?”

“Latoya Reavis.” Willie laughed. “Why them girls always have names that begin with LA? Did you ever wonder about that?”

“Where does she live Willie?”

“Filene’s basement.”

“Don’t mess with us Willie,” Neal barked.

“No, man, that’s what we call those apartments on Tremont. Basement apartments. Everybody in the hood calls them that. I thought that you woulda known that, Detective Simpson.”

“No Willie,” Neal replied. “I didn’t know that. You taught me something new today, and I’m grateful to you for that. Which basement does Latoya live in?”

“Man, I don’t know the number. But you can tell by the door. It’s got a bunch of graffiti all over it, in red paint. Bright red. Looks kinda nice actually.”

After the cops drove Willie back to his grandmother's apartment, a short trip made longer by their informant's ceaseless and occasionally incoherent chatter about real-estate, there was no doubt in their minds about what to do next. Still, Neal asked.

"Pay Ms. Reavis a visit, right Ben?"

"Right. It's after 10. She might even be awake."

"Get a warrant or take our chances?"

"Might as well dial-a-judge and do it right. Won't take long."

"Gotcha."

Neal flipped open his cell and put in the call. After a brief conversation, he told Ben that they could head over to the courthouse right away. Twenty minutes later they arrived, and when the car was parked Ben asked his partner whether he would mind going in by himself to pick up the warrant. "I got a few calls I need to make," Ben told him.

Neal knew that this was code for "I need to take a nap," and so he cheerfully agreed. Despite the mounting heat and humidity, within a minute of the door being slammed Ben started to nod off. But each time he fell asleep his head would drop and his neck would hurt, and he would wake back up. And each time he'd lift his head and try again. When Neal returned he had no idea how long, or even if, he had actually slept. The only certainty was that he didn't feel good.

"You score?" he asked with as much enthusiasm as he could fake.

"Hell yeah. Let's roll."

“Right,” Ben replied, with no enthusiasm at all.

An hour later, properly equipped with a warrant, they parked in front of a dilapidated building on Tremont Street whose basement apartment had a door completely covered in bright red scribbles.

“You think he’s in there, Ben?”

“He might well be. Willie’s pretty reliable.”

“Should we call backup?”

“Nah. Let’s just give it a shot.”

They both drew their guns as Neal knocked on the door. No response. He knocked again. Hard. Still no answer. They knocked a third time, and finally a woman’s harsh voice responded.

“What the fuck you want?”

“Latoya Reavis? This is the police. Would you open the door up please? We want to ask you a few questions.” Neal and Ben both moved away from the door.

No response. And then the handle of the door began to turn. A powerfully built black woman, average height with a top and a bottom far beyond average, opened the door and was greeted by Neal’s gun. Wearing only a halter top and a pair of jeans, a gaudy necklace, fake gold, around her neck, two hoop earrings, she seemed unconcerned, almost scornful. Neal shouted, “Where’s String?”

“Sleeping,” Latoya responded, looking Neal straight in the eye. “Whatch you think?”

“Where?”

“In the bedroom. Where you think he’d be?”

“Why don’t you show us,” Neal said.

Latoya looked miffed but not alarmed as she reluctantly led the two detectives into the bed room, which was really no more than a queen-sized mattress on the floor next to a tattered chest of drawers and two folding chairs. A long black man, so thin that his rib cage was visible, wearing only boxers, was asleep on the bed.

“Wake him up,” Neal said.

“Shit,” Latoya hissed. But she went to the bed and pushed hard on Stringbean’s shoulder. “Yo, Winfred, wake your ass up. Cops here.”

Stringbean was groggy, and the effects of the drugs were obvious. It took him nearly a minute to register the fact that two police officers, weapons drawn, were standing over him.

“Good morning, Mr. Bennett,” Neal said. “Would you get up please. We want to ask you a few questions.”

“What the fuck?” String managed to utter as he stood up. “What the fuck I do?” When he finally realized that Neal was pointing his gun at him, he perked up, looked panicked, and raised his hands high.

“I didn’t do nothing. You got a warrant?”

“As a matter of fact, we do,” Neal told him as he pulled the document out of his pocket and waved it in Stringbean’s general direction. “Where were you last night?”

“I didn’t do nothing.”

“I didn’t ask you what you did. I asked you where you were.”

“Out. Walking around.”

“What do you know about the dead white guy in Peters Park?”

“Dead white guy?” The kid looked worried. “I don’t know nothing. Didn’t see nothing. Why you busting me? I didn’t do nothing. You got a warrant?”

“Don’t waste our time, Mr. Bennett,” Ben said forcefully. He moved closer to String to make palpable the fact that he was as tall as his suspect. “We need to know exactly where you were last night.”

“Getting high,” String said sadly. “Like always. Hung out on the street for a while. Ended up at Rubens, drinking a little. But no more than that. So why you crashing my crib?”

“Where’s your pack?”

“My pack? Whatch you want my pack for?” String looked worried.

“Where is it, String?”

He didn’t answer.

“Mr. Bennett,” Ben said, drawing even closer to provide a maximum level of threat, “please don’t waste any more of our time. Show us your Spiderman backpack. Right now.”

String stared as if hypnotized by Ben’s words. Latoya still seemed indifferent, but her patience was wearing thin. “Shit, Winfred, you better show them your pack. They gonna find it anyway.”

He looked at her as if she were his mother speaking to a small child, and he meekly said, “all right.” But he didn’t move. Instead, he looked around the room as if he were lost. “I don’t know where it is.”

“Find it,” Neal growled.

“Maybe it’s in the closet. Look there.”

Neal opened the one closet door in the bedroom. A pile of clothes lay on the floor, and Neal kicked through them. Nothing.

“Not there,” he said.

“Shit, where’d I put it?” String asked himself in a voice genuinely puzzled.

“Try the bathroom,” Latoya said.

“Yeah, try the bathroom,” String echoed.

Neal complied. He was relieved to see that the small room looked normal. There were towels hanging on a rack, tooth brushes on a clean sink along with a bar of soap. And a large plastic Spiderman pack was sitting in the middle of the bathtub.

“Do you mind if I take a look inside, Mr. Bennett?” Neal asked.

“You got a warrant?”

“As a matter of fact we do. You have nothing to hide, do you?”

String looked defeated and he nodded his head in submission. Neal poked around the pack and found a pair of basketball shoes, a rancid pair of white socks, and a wallet. He looked inside, found a driver’s license, and read its name out loud: “Brian Mortensen.”

“I found it, I didn’t even steal it.”

Neal dug a little deeper into the bottom of the pack and retrieved a Smith & Wesson 41, with an adjustable target sight and a wooden grip. A very nice pistol.

“Oh shit,” Stringbean said.

“Cuff him, Ben,” Neal barked, all the while training his gun on Stringbean Bennett, whose skinny frame looked frozen in its gloom. Ben looked slightly surprised when his junior partner gave him an order, but he complied cheerfully.

“Cuff her too.”

“Right. Will do.”

“Whatch you gotta cuff me for?” Latoya protested. “He's the one got the pack.”

“I found that shit,” Stringbean protested. “I never heard of Morton’s son, I swear. I didn’t steal nothing. There was this pile of stuff in the middle of the sidewalk next to the park, just sitting there, the cell phone was on top of the wallet, like someone had put it there for me to take. I just picked this shit up. No lie.”

“Where’s the phone?”

“Tossed it into a dumpster.”

“Why?”

“Don’t need another cell phone.”

“Why didn’t you sell it?”

String looked thoughtful and mouthed the one word, “damn.”

“Where’s the dumpster?”

“Shit, I don’t know. Maybe it was on Tremont, near the projects.”

“What about the gun?”

Stringbean paused before answering. “Yeah. That was on the bottom. Wallet on top of it. I just took it. Didn’t use it. Had no need.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah I’m sure.”

“Why’d you take the gun?”

“Why?” String replied, genuinely baffled by the question. “I don’t know. Figured I could sell it. Or maybe keep it. For protection, you know. I didn’t shoot it.”

“Just found it sitting there begging to be taken?”

“That’s right. Just found it.”

“Why didn’t you take the money and toss the wallet?”

“Don’t know. Forgot.”

“Was there a computer too?”

“No man, no computer,” Stringbean said reluctantly.

“What’d you do with the computer, Winfred?” Neal barked.

“I don’t know nothing about no computer. I told you, a wallet and a cell phone and the gun. Piled up neat on the sidewalk.”

“Who’d you sell the computer to?” Neal insisted.

“Nobody,” String said, his voice drained of protest.

Neal sighed in parallel resignation. He pulled out his phone and called the station. When he was done, he resumed his conversation with Stringbean. “Why’d you shoot him, Stringbean? Why didn’t you just take his stuff and leave?”

“I didn’t shoot nobody,” Stringbean replied, clearly anxious. “I never shot nobody in my whole life. People shot at me, but I didn’t shoot back. When I saw that stuff I figured it was just, I don’t know, like a present, like Christmas or something. Like somebody was just giving it to me. It was all stacked up together like that. You know, neat.”

Neal looked disgusted and said nothing more during the five minutes it took for two uniforms to arrive and haul Stringbean and Latoya, as well as a nicely stuffed evidence bag, away.

“That was quick. We need to raise Willie’s salary,” Neal said over their second cup of coffee of the day.

“Maybe,” Ben replied.

“What? You think there’s any chance String could be telling the truth? That he found the gun?”

“Probably not.”

“String’s the perp. He’s got the wallet and the gun.”

“Probably,” Ben replied. “But that was an expensive pistol we found, not the type usually seen on the mean streets. Let’s see what they find out about it at the lab. Plus, his wife said that Brian carried a laptop in his backpack. What happened to it?”

“The kid sold it.”

“He said he didn’t.”

“Come off it Ben. You can’t possibly believe this guy, can you?”

“I try not to believe anyone. Even you.”

Neal laughed. “Well believe me when I tell you that we caught the perp in a few hours. We just set a record Ben! Let’s chalk this one up and bust out the champagne.”

“The Yankees were chalking up their win last year over the Red Sox, remember. Up three games to none in the playoffs. Remember what happened.”

Neal's face fell.

The 2004 American League Playoffs series was literally unbelievable. Behind three games to none to the mighty Yankees, a deficit never overcome in the history of baseball, and so the Red Sox did the impossible. They won four straight. Even Ben, who followed the game methodically, but still kept it at some emotional distance from himself, was caught up in the fervor. He watched the last game at O'Leary's on Beacon Street, and he cheered with all other maniacs. His pleasure in the victory was shattered, however, when a student from Emerson College, a young woman, was inadvertently killed by a cop's pellet gun during a riotous celebration in Kenmore Square. "Stupid cops," is what Ben thought.

"Okay Ben," Neal said, recovering cheerfully. "I'll try not to jump to conclusions. We got a suspect with the stiff's wallet and we find a .22 caliber pistol, which just happened to be the weapon of choice last night. But this series may not be over yet."

Ben smiled, his tired eyes narrowing in appreciation. "Now you're talking."

"Should we try to find the cell phone?"

"I suppose. Ring the number, see if we can locate it. If it's on. Can the techies do that sort of thing?"

"My man, techies can do anything they damn well please," Neal replied triumphantly.

"That's what I'm afraid of, Neal."

Moira Monahan was not a typical Assistant District Attorney. She had a Ph.D. in French Literature from Harvard, and had been a professor for five years at Boston University. She hadn't been a typical professor either. For one thing, she liked to teach. For another, she was kind, sensible and unassuming. Even though she had enjoyed life in the university she had given up her job to go to Law School. Because she had published nothing, she knew she would never get tenure. Writing had tortured her. Deftly smart, wonderfully well read, Moira froze when her fingers came close to the keyboard. She had cried all the way through her dissertation, which had taken her nearly four years to complete, and when as a first year professor she had been asked to write a review of three recently published books on Balzac for a prestigious journal, she spent months revising the first and only paragraph of her essay.

Almost 5' 11", with a perfectly proportioned body, she wore large, clumsy glasses, uninteresting and unrevealing clothes, and had shoulder length brown hair. Her face was long and on a first look her mouth and eyes seemed unexpressive, but when you got to know Moira Monahan even a little, when you could begin to feel her warmth and intelligence and wit, her face liven up. She moved awkwardly most of the time, like she was out of place. But she still seemed glad.

Even though he was more than a decade older, she had once asked Ben out for a dinner. They had gone to the Barking Crab on the Fort Point Channel. He had the fried shrimp, she the lobster. She talked with animation, and he smiled often but didn't say much, even when they were discussing Moira's insomnia. He acknowledged that he

suffered from the same problem, but didn't elaborate. A second date never materialized. But a few months ago, when he mentioned to her that his father, who lived in an assisted living home, had gotten a bad cold and was totally miserable, she had stood up and given him a spontaneous, thoroughly well intentioned hug. He was surprised how graceful she was when she embraced him, and just how good it felt. He thought often about calling her, and wanted to trade insomnia stories with her, but so far hadn't been able to.

ADA Monahan was watching String's interrogation, watching him resist Neal's exhortation to make it easier on himself by confessing.

"Come on String. You had his wallet and my guess is that we're gonna get a match on the gun. And you were out on the street last night. You said so yourself. Nobody saw you last night so you don't have an alibi in the world. Give it up now, and we'll see if we can make this go a little easier for you."

"No, man, I didn't do nothing. I'm telling you the truth. I was walking on the street, I saw the wallet and the cell on the sidewalk. I picked them up, put them inside my pack."

"And the gun too?"

"Yeah, that too. In a, I don't know, pile or something. But I didn't shoot that gun."

"What'd you do next?"

"That wallet had a little cash. I spent most of the money and I bought some more stuff from a dealer who lives near Filenes. Shit, I did all that illegal stuff. But I didn't kill nobody. I ain't never killed nobody. I never even shot that gun. Whatch you do with Latoya? She didn't do nothing either."

“What’d you do with the computer, Winfred?”

“I didn’t find no computer. I told you that already.”

And so it went for over an hour. ADA Monahan had seen enough, and told Ben to book Winfred Bennett who, badly needing his drugs, was relentlessly being swept up by the shakes, for the murder of Brian Mortensen.

“Nice work Ben,” she said to him. “It’s just past noon and you got this bastard cold. Amazing.”

“Neal did most of it. But I don’t know. Doesn’t feel quite right.”

“Why?” Moira asked.

“I don’t know. The pistol doesn’t seem to fit the profile. Too expensive. And Brian’s wife said he carried a laptop with him. We found the pack and everything else, but not the computer.”

“What about the cell phone?”

“We tried calling it, but no response. Kid said he tossed it into a dumpster. Maybe it broke.”

“So that part of his story can’t be confirmed.”

“Nope. But I don’t know, most of all this kid doesn’t seem to have much muscle to him. I don’t see him shooting a guy and then falling right to sleep.”

“Just because *you* can’t sleep doesn’t mean other people can’t,” Moira said with a grin. “He had the wallet and the gun. And what he doesn’t have is an alibi.”

“Moira Monahan, woman of conviction,” Ben said to her.

“Ben Kaplan, man of doubt,” she answered. “You’re usually the one who’s sure he’s right. What’s up with this?”

“Doesn’t quite add up. String’s a loser all the way around. How’d he get Brian into the park?”

“Pulled his gun and told him to start walking.”

“Into the dugout? You think String could muster that much foresight? He’s stoned out of his mind. If he wanted to shoot him, he’d do it right on the spot.”

“Pretty busy street. A lot of witnesses.”

“I know that, but String’s not exactly the type given to the systematic promotion of his own self-interest.”

She laughed when he said this, and then she smiled warmly at him. “But who is? How many people do you think actually operate rationally, with a clear view of their own best interests? Maybe Winfred Bennett is no better or worse than the rest of us on that score. Maybe he acted on an impulse. An impulse, Ben. You’ve had those, haven’t you.”

“Yes, I have. I actually remember one, from the mid-nineties.”

She laughed again. “What was it like?”

Ben pretended to think about which impulse he had meant and then said, “A disaster.”

She didn’t laugh. Instead, she said, “look, it doesn’t take too many brains to figure out that a park is a better place to do bad things than a street. String’s surely capable of that.”

“You’re probably right,” Ben conceded. “But the girl is confirming the kid’s story. She said that when he came home he told her he found the wallet and gun on the sidewalk.”

“You believe her?” Moira asked incredulously.

“Why not? Her devotion to Bennett doesn’t seem exactly iron-clad. Why would she protect him?”

“Love makes people do strange things.” She looked at him, but her glasses cloaked the feeling in her eyes. Still, Ben felt an uncomfortable twinge. He wanted to move towards her but held himself back.

“Does it?” he asked, his head drooping in recognition of his own inability.

“Yes. Or so I’ve read.”

“And what have you been reading, Moira?” he asked, perking up.

“*Madame Bovary*, of course.”

“I’m a *War and Peace* kind of guy myself.”

“So, you like it.”

“Only the war part.”

For a third time, Moira laughed. “Maybe that’s why you and I don’t get along.”

“I always thought we got along fine,” he said sincerely and with a touch of alarm in his voice.

“Think what you will,” she said with a touch of contempt in her voice. “Anyway, give *Anna Karenina* a try.” She paused. “How about some lunch? It’s not too late.

We’ve got this one locked up.”

“Lunch?”

“It’s been a productive day for you, Detective. A collar before lunch and you probably haven’t even had a decent breakfast.”

Ben didn’t respond and so gave Moira the opening to say, “Then you must be starved. Let’s get some lunch.”

When he thought about it he realized she was right: he was starved. Ben shot Moira Monahan a quick glance. She looked hopeful and this made Ben sad.

“I’m sorry, Moira. Neal and I have some business to attend to. I want to check out a few a things about our friend Brian Mortensen.”

She didn’t let disappointment show on her face. But the way she abruptly turned away from him after saying, “Well then, duty calls,” made Ben know that she was and then he felt even sadder. Only past noon and not only had he put Stringbean Bennett behind bars but he also had kept Moira Monahan at arm’s length. Neal interrupted his thoughts when he sidled up to him and said, “Hey, let’s grab some lunch, Ben.”

“Good idea,” Ben said gratefully. “Let’s go over to Kendall Square. Pay a visit to Brian’s lab. See what’s up there.”

Neal rolled his eyes. “Oh man, let’s just sit for a while. Forget Mortensen. Wait till Stringbean talks.”

“Nope. Gotta find out more about Brian.”

Neal glared. “Okay, but we eat first.”

“Sure. But let’s eat over at Kendall Square. And just give me a minute, would you. I gotta make a call.”

His brief flirtation with Moira, if that’s what it was, left Ben feeling unsettled. He walked out of the building and onto the steaming sidewalk. Small streams of energy were flowing through him, and so he followed his customary procedure. He called Holly even though he thought it likely that she’d be at the gym or having lunch with friends, and probably wouldn’t answer the phone. Ben stood outside the station, glanced around to make sure no one was within listening range, and pushed her number. To his surprise, she

did pick up. She was at the gym, on an elliptical machine, but had forgotten to turn off her phone. Ben had lucked out. As usual, she seemed glad to hear from him. Plus, she had a cancellation and was available that evening. They made an appointment for 8 p.m. at the Marsh Hotel, which was an unexpected treat. Not only because of her professional obligations, but also because she too was an insomniac, Holly usually scheduled their meetings for much later.

When he put his phone away, Ben took a deep breath. A slight spasm of shame ripped through him as images of both Holly and Moira floated by, and for a moment he felt dizzy. He lit a cigarette, and along with the smoke the feeling slowly blew away. When both were out of sight, he sighed heavily and threw the butt on the sidewalk.

Kendall Square, on the periphery of the campus of MIT, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was home to the biggest pharmaceutical companies in the world. Hulking, glass and metal monuments to human ingenuity, they had names like Genesgot, Genam, Hylogenics, names that, just like the molecules being cooked up inside, were designed to make people feel better. All the buildings were new, squat and massive, and placed far enough away from their neighbors to insure that no contact between their inhabitants would occur. The streets of Kendall Square had become valleys, walled in by buildings and windows, and it seemed that no people ever walked on them.

Neal and Ben found an outdoor café in the plaza at One Kendall Square, a conglomeration of offices and restaurants, where they sat under an umbrella. Surprisingly, for a warm and sunny day the café too was nearly empty. Only two tables were occupied, and at each of them sat clone-like pairs of men, and though Ben himself was no ad for GQ these guys were dressed without an iota of style. All four of them were wearing some sort of identity card or badge at their belts or around their necks, and though they looked utterly beigned out their voices were full of enthusiasm.

“Don’t these birds ever eat lunch?” Ben asked. “Or are they always locked in their offices staring at screens?”

“Maybe they just come out for dinner, after work.”

“Zombies,” Ben muttered.

“Or maybe they’re all on vacation.”

“Maybe.”

They sat there and looked for a waiter.

“So what sort of nonsense are you gonna start spouting about this place?” Neal asked.

“I don’t like it.”

“I figured that. I’m a detective too, remember?”

“Gives me the creeps. No one sitting outside on a nice day like this. The world on a screen. Streets empty. Lifeless.”

“What makes you think that? And what makes you think you could possibly know anything about what’s going on here? We don’t know what’s gonna come out of these buildings. Might be something to save the world. That’s what they do in science: experiment.”

“You can’t experiment on yourself.”

“Why not?”

“Because if it doesn’t work out, you’re fucked.”

“Chicken-shit honkey. Alice’s a diabetic. What do you think her life would have been like without the stuff they make here?”

“That’s what they do. They make stuff.”

“And you gotta problem with that?”

“Nothing wrong with making stuff. Problem starts when that’s all you know how to do.”

“Fabulous speech. I’m just telling you one thing: some guy in one of these buildings probably figured out how to help my wife. And my Aunt Lillie, if she didn’t have her Zoloft, she’d be a basket-case.”

“Maybe. But at least it would be her own basket. Anyway, this place gives me the creeps.”

Neal laughed. “Yeah, but everything gives you the creeps.”

“I can feel it closing in on me. Must be the way your vest feels on you.”

“But I kind of like the feel of my vest. It’s comforting.”

Whenever he was on his duty Neal wore his bullet-proof vest. He had promised Alice, and so no matter how often Ben teased him, or how hot it was, he always had it on. It was the latest model, a ultra-thin Kevlar product, that weighed barely two pounds.

“You read the article about those guys in Canada who are mixing the genes of goats and spiders?” Neal asked. “They milk the goats and then they make fabric from it. Fabric as strong as a spider web, which is the strongest material on earth. Someday they’ll make vests that feel like and weigh as much regular shirts.”

“Progress. We’ll able to shoot each other more often.”

Neal laughed. “Wonder what’s taking us so long to get some service?”

Neal’s answer came soon, when the waitress, a young woman, dressed in black pants and a tee shirt, and looking like a student, arrived at their table. But instead of asking what they wanted, she asked them if they had heard.

“Heard what?” Neal asked.

“It just happened. Bombings in London. Subways, buses, at least 40 people dead. It was rush-hour; people were coming home from work.”

The girl was shaken, nearly in tears. She continued, “I’m sorry, I know people in London. There’s a Boston College summer program there. I almost went, but I couldn’t

afford not to work. I have friends there. I have friends.” She looked lost, and was trembling.

Ben gently pressed the girl for more details, but all she could do was repeat that they had hit subways and buses. He tried to calm her down.

“London’s huge. Millions and millions of people. There’s almost no chance that your friends were hurt. I’m sure they’re okay. Have you called them?”

“No. But I will. They say only forty people were killed.”

“Only,” Ben thought.

“Your friends are fine,” Neal said gently.

“Thanks,” the girl said.

“Take our order, though, would you please,” Neal suggested.

“Sure.”

After they ordered their sandwiches and coffee, Neal and Ben fell silent. As usual, Ben was surprised by the blank slate that were his emotions. Was it because such attacks were inevitable? Or because his children and his ex-wife were safe in New York and Mexico? He didn’t know and so he deliberately summoned familiar images, ones borrowed from the recent, horrific bombings that had taken place in Madrid. He called up images of bloodied women and men holding their wounded heads, their shirts stained red, as they ascended from the subway and were ushered into ambulances. He saw a young woman in shock, staring at her hands whose fingers were hidden, submerged in gore. Ben checked: still not much going on inside.

Ben had been exempted from most of the counter-terrorist training that his colleagues had received. He did take the requisite seminars on chemical and nuclear

attacks, for even a senior homicide detective would be pulled into service when they occurred.

On the morning of September 11, about an hour after the airplanes crashed into the Towers, Miriam had called him to say that she was safely ensconced in midtown, and that she had called David in Brooklyn and Paul at Trinity. She told him not to worry. Crazy by doing nothing, and by the TV in the station house spitting out the same vile images over and over and over again, as if it had an electronic version of Turette's syndrome, he got into his Volvo and started to drive West on the Mass Pike, towards New York. He got as far as Hopkinton when he realized he was being stupid. He felt as if he had just been awoken from a dream by a loud clap of thunder, and so he drove back to Boston where he was posted in Logan Airport and told to walk around uselessly.

He wondered whether the destruction of the Towers and the bombings in Madrid had prepared him for today. Was that why he could go forward, business as usual? Or was it because other people's children were dead, not his? Or because, as the waitress had said, the number was only forty?

"Want to get to a TV, Ben? Or a computer?" Neal asked.

"No, I'm okay. We can't do a damn thing. I'll read about it later. When they've finished the body count."

"Brits do that sort of thing slowly, you know."

"Yeah, so I heard."

He sat back in his chair, let a thin sheen of sadness settle upon him, but then felt the gears shift, and his mind focus on the business at hand. He was surprised at how easily this occurred, and wondered if he should be ashamed of himself.

Casper Weingarten was a tiny man. Since he didn't offer his hand when the two detectives walked into his office, Ben kept his distance and hunched to make himself look as short as possible. Casper's white shirt was wrinkled, his thick hair and thin beard revealed no evidence of tending. He was sitting at what sufficed for a desk: a board the length and width of a door sitting on two filing cabinets. He did have a nice chair, though: a Henry Miller. The President and CEO of Elpigen, a small pharmaceutical company, a boutique Research and Development shop, looked utterly distraught. Ben wondered if it was because of the bombings in London or Brian. His question was answered within seconds of meeting Casper Weingarten.

"I can't believe Brian's dead," the little man said. "I just can't believe it."

"How'd you find out?"

"Everyone knows. It was on the Internet."

"How late was he working last night, Mr. Weingarten?"

"How late? Oh gosh, I don't know. Usual time, I guess. Around 7, 8."

"How late did you stay?"

"I was here till nearly midnight. Normal for me."

"Why so late?"

"Well, we're on to something. Something big. Geez, I can't believe he's dead."

"Did you know Brian socially?"

"Socially?"

"Did you get together outside of the office?"

“Sure. Of course. Our families got together on a few weekends. My kids are older, but he’d bring his out to Lexington for a barbeque now and then. I knew Fern.” His eyes had a faraway look when he mentioned her name. “Fern! My God. How’s she holding up? Geez, maybe I should call her?”

“She’s doing okay, Mr. Weingarten. What were you and Brian working on?”

Casper fell silent. “Do I have to tell you?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “This is official police business, isn’t it, so I guess I do, don’t I? Plus, it doesn’t really matter any more. With Brian dead, that one’s finished. Bernie and I can’t do it by ourselves. Brian was the key.”

“Who’s Bernie?”

“Bernie Olen, Brian’s lab partner. Oh, he’s taking Brian’s death much worse than me. He didn’t come into the office today. He called me this morning. Said he read about Brian’s murder on the Internet and he didn’t sound too good.”

“Bernie and Brian were close?”

“They worked together.”

“You need to give us Bernie’s home address, okay Mr. Weingarten.”

Casper pushed the button that rang his secretary, and asked her to get Bernie’s address.

“Okay, so what were you working on? What was this big project of yours?”

“Sleep.”

Ben’s body tightened.

“Sweet Dreams. That’s what we called the project. We were breaking through, cramming in some very good Benzodiazepine, bumping up the GABA receptors, pushing

up PGO waves and so REM was better. You know, Rapid Eye Movement before deep sleep sets in. We were cleaning the sides, crazy raising the duration, crazy, crazy, crazy. Long term, it could take care of chronic sleep problems and that's the ticket. All the others last about a week. And best of all, and this was the genius part, Brian had the idea of adding a dopamine bump into Sweet Dreams. That's why the dreams would be so sweet. Most people think dreams are nothing but neural static, nothing to them at all but buzz. Brian had a different view. He was so far into dreams, way beyond the rest of everyone else in the Square. Nobody could touch him. And we were only about a year away from beginning pre-clinical testing.

“Everybody else thought Brian was crazy. No one thinks you can mess with people's dreams. But I was willing to give him a chance to run with his idea. That's why he liked it here. We let him do exactly what he wanted. You see, antidepressants produce more serotonin and norepinephrine, but it's the deactivation of these chemicals that produces REM sleep. Most anti-depressants, SSRIs and MAO-inhibitors, generally cause insomnia and suppress REM sleep, the stage in which dreaming occurs. So you'd think it would be impossible to mix a cheer-me-up with a sleep med. You'd think you can knock somebody out at night, but not give them sweet dreams. Brian thought he could do it.”

The little man paused, and then said, with some gravity, “dopamine.” He paused again. “Dopamine is activated during REM sleep. It most likely contributes to the madness of dreams. So Brian had a scheme to bump up the dopamine and knock you out at the same time. It might not have worked but it was very cool.”

Again, the little man paused. “Does this make any sense? Probably not. But 30 million Americans suffer from chronic insomnia. Maybe more. And did you know that

those sleepless nights cost the country billions of dollars? Accidents, lower productivity, sick days, medical treatment. And we might have had the ticket. But it doesn't matter any more. Brian's gone."

Casper Weingarten seemed to crumple into his chair, which made him seem even smaller than he was. He buried his head into his hands, and began to cry.

Ben had to ask several times for explanation before Casper had translated his manic tirade into something resembling comprehensible English. He didn't understand the science but one thing was clear: Elpigen was on to something big. If it could actually come into being, Sweet Dreams would be a killer product. This Ben knew for he knew that he was not alone, and often when he should have been asleep late at night he was actually reading about the epidemic of insomnia. A med that put you down at night but got you up in the morning feeling okay was a God damned golden goose.

Casper's head popped up suddenly from his mournful hands, and he nearly screamed, "but we weren't going to call it Sweet Dreams. That was just what we called it here in the shop. We would have come up with a great name. I know we would have."

"What's wrong with Sweet Dreams, Mr. Weingarten?" Ben asked.

"Doesn't sound scientific. Oh heck, what's it matter. Brian's gone. Dead. Dead and gone. Gone." Now the small man looked entirely vacant as he stared right through the two Detectives.

"Tell me more about Brian," Ben gently asked him.

"He was the best in the business. A genius behind that screen. Had two Ph.D.s you know. One in computer science, the other in molecular biology. Got them both from Cal Tech before he was 30. He was awesome. I knew he was really good when I hired

him, but not how good. The only reason I got him was that he was sick of the traffic in Silicon Valley. Said he wanted to be in a city, wanted to take the train to work, wanted his kids to grow up around different kinds of people. And he wanted to work in a small shop. And with Bernie. They had known each other back in California. Soon as he got here, and started publishing and giving presentations, other firms tried to steal him. Especially Epochal. Degner's been after him for two years. Maybe he got wind of Sweet Dreams, but I don't see how that would be possible. We run a tight ship here. But Degner has his ways."

"Who's Degner?" Neal asked.

"Michael Degner. CEO of Epochal. One of the biggest shops in Kendall Square. You must know their building. The big one with the purple neon sign on top. Degner's like a rich kid in a toy store. Sees something he likes, and scoops it up. Offered to double Brian's salary. Which is already pretty darn high."

"The George Steinbrenner of the pharmaceutical industry?" Ben asked.

"Who?"

"Sorry. Brian wasn't interested in Degner's offer?"

"No. He liked it here. We're just pipsqueaks. We do some good research and then sell it off to big-Pharma. But maybe, with Sweet Dreams, we'd have been able to raise the cash to produce it ourselves. Takes nearly a billion to bring a drug to market, so it was a long shot. But if it could do chronic it might have been possible. Well, not any more. Anyway, Brian and Bernie didn't mind working on a smaller scale. They had a pretty good support staff and we all got along really well. Really well."

The faraway, distraught, confused look reappeared in Casper's eyes again. "I don't know what I'll do without Brian." He paused. "Oh God," he said, as if he just remembered something. "What about Fern and the kids? What are they going to do without Brian? What's Bernie going to do?"

"Does Epochal have a drug like Sweet Dreams in the pipeline?" Ben asked.

"Of course. Everybody does. I mean, nothing like ours. Nobody had that. But everybody in Kendall Square is doing sleep these days."

"Why can't people sleep anymore, Mr. Weingarten?"

"Who knows. Stress. Electricity. What people eat. Not enough physical exhaustion. The velocity of modern life, too much light, teflon frying pans, microwaves, anxiety. You name it, we've got it."

The little man stood up from his chair and blurted out, "Oh my god, did you hear about the bombings in London today? Of course, you did. That was terrible and there'll probably be more." As quickly as he had arisen, he was back in his chair.

"Brian thought people couldn't sleep because they don't have good dreams anymore. And even if they do, they don't take them seriously. He wanted to give us our dreams back. I never really paid attention to that sort of stuff. I don't know what causes insomnia. My job was to produce a drug to make it go away, not figure out how it got here."

"What's Fern Mortensen like?" Ben asked. Neal looked puzzled.

"Fern? Awesome. Doesn't talk much, though."

"Is she a scientist too?"

"Chemist. But wet."

“Wet?”

“She likes test tubes, molecules. She’s old school. No interest in computers or pharmaceuticals. Great athlete. She ran the Boston Marathon last year. Brian was devoted to her. And his girls.”

“But he still worked till 8?”

“I didn’t make him work late. I always made sure my employees had time for their families. But Brian wanted to. Sometimes we’d all go out for dinner after work. Not often, though.”

“Did Brian have any enemies?”

“Enemies? He was a scientist, why would he have any enemies?”

“Anything strange in the last week or so?”

“Strange?” Casper paused to think. “No. Nothing strange.

The cops thanked the little man behind the enormous desk, who didn’t bother to stand up when they left. When they got outside, they were assaulted by the thick hot air of the late afternoon and both men immediately began to sweat.

“We gotta visit Degner, right?” Neal asked with a sigh, as they stood on the sidewalk in front of the Elpigen building.

“Right,” Ben acknowledged.

“What are you hunting for Ben?”

“I don’t know. Degner’s the competition. He wanted Brian to work for him. Brian refuses, pisses Degner off.”

“Oh come on Ben, do you really think a corporate CEO would bump off a scientist? That’s more than a little crazy. I know you don’t like these people much, but

that doesn't make a bit of sense. These people are cut-throat but they don't shoot each other. Not in Cambridge, anyway."

"I know. Still, I'd like to meet this guy. Fill out the picture a little bit. Dramatic context."

"Context...you like that word, don't you?"

"Sure do."

"Oh hell, Ben, Stringbean Bennett popped Brian Mortensen! Took his wallet. Had the gun. We got the bad guy locked up."

"You're probably right. But bear with me, okay? Let's get a bigger picture."

"How big?"

"Big enough to fit the details. A guy's dead, Neal. We owe him."

"Owe him what?"

"A story. Was it just bad bad luck, bumping into a stoned Stringbean on a dark street? Is that all? Just a wrong step, two intersecting lines and boom, it's over. Do we chalk up the ending of this one short life to nothing but bad luck?"

"Why not? Happens all the time. Might happen to you."

"Maybe. But it's a crummy story. Good story needs a beginning, a middle and an end that fit together. It's gotta be whole."

"Yeah, but maybe life doesn't come in wholes. Think about those poor suckers in London. Get on a train to come home from work, reading the newspaper and thinking about their supper, and the next thing you know bits and pieces flying every which way. Maybe things just sort of dribble until, I don't know, it runs out of steam. No beginning or end, just a bunch of middles. Maybe the only story is the one you're making up."

Ben smiled in admiration but didn't say anything.

"I don't want a story, Ben, I want a collar and a bad guy off the street. That's what they pay me for. Then I get out of this heat and go home."

"And then you go up the chain of command."

"Damn right I do," Neal snarled. "My job is to get the creeps off the street, not tell stories about big bad drug companies. Come on Ben, you're letting your prejudices run away on you. It's too hot to do that."

"Once upon a time," Ben said patiently in his teacherly voice, "there was a young scientist named Brian Mortensen. He had a gorgeous wife who could run marathons, and two little girls who max out on the cute scale. He came to Boston to get away from the crowded highways of Silicon Valley and to get a touch of the urban. He liked taking public transportation. He was doing top of the line research for a pharmaceutical company on the verge of a breakthrough on the insomnia front. Then he had the great misfortune of running into one Winfred Bennett, who was stoned out of his mind, and who decided to shoot him through the heart for no good reason on the night before the London bombings. You buy that?"

"Why not?"

"Are we really going to let poor, pathetic Stringbean Bennett be the hero in this tale? He's not up to it."

"Doesn't take much to pull a trigger. Especially when you're stoned."

Ben, blank-eyed, looked at his partner and repeated, "You're probably right. But let's go visit Michael Degner anyway. I'm guessing his office will be air-conditioned."

Epochal Pharmaceuticals was housed in a seven-story building, a couple of blocks outside of One Kendall Square. Except for the windows—huge rectangles jutting out from the sides of the building—and a gaudy neon sign that shouted “Epochal” in giant purple letters, the place was featureless.

Neal and Ben were led into Michael Degner’s office by a beautiful Asian woman with flinty eyes and a skirt that barely reached her thighs. They declined her offers of sparkling water, espresso, or green tea.

The office itself was decked out in high-tech modernist: the desk sleek mahogany and long, the chairs black leather. The walls of the office were covered with paintings, all of them abstract, consisting almost exclusively of lines and strokes. Ben thought the use of color, especially the shades of blue, was stunning. He had plenty of time to look at them because Degner made them wait.

He strode into the room fast-paced, his limbs awkward and long. Quite tall, probably close in height to Ben, and though he wasn’t any sort of athlete he did have the feel of someone confident in his own body. His full and luxuriant brown hair, probably dyed, was combed back giving him the look like someone who might manage rock stars. The thick frames of his glasses were jet black, his eye-brows thick, his face thin. And what a suit. It had to be custom made Italian.

“Gentlemen, sorry to keep you waiting. I’m Michael Degner,” he said extending an extremely long-fingered hand.

“Mr. Degner, I’m Detective Kaplan, and this is my partner, Detective Simpson.”

“Doctor Degner, if you don’t mind.”

“Don’t mind at all.”

“Did you guys hear about the bombings in London. Of course you did. The body count is up to up to 43. We’ve got Brits working for us. Jesus. They’re shaken up. But this is about Brian, isn’t it?”

“How’d you know?”

Degner’s smile was close to a smirk. “Kendall Square is like a small town. News travels fast. It was on the web by 7:30. My secretary told me about it.”

“What exactly did you hear?”

“That he was shot in a park in South Boston this morning.”

“South End, not South Boston.”

“Right. And they found him in a baseball dugout. That’s amazing. An amazing shame. Brian was a superstar.”

“How so?”

“The best screen in town. I tried to hire him myself. Offered to double his salary, but he stuck it out with Casper Milquetoast.”

“Weingarten?”

“What a loser. Look around. Would you pass up the chance to work here, Officer Kaplan?”

“Detective.”

“What?”

“Detective Kaplan.”

“Right. But would you? Elpigen’s no more than a chemistry set in the garage compared to us. Sorry, I shouldn’t be disrespectful right now, should I? But it’s hard to resist.” He guffawed. “Anyway, I did make a pass at Brian, but he turned me down. That doesn’t happen very often.”

“We hear he was working on something special at Elpigen.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me. He was one talented guy. And Casper actually knows what he’s doing. He runs a good shop. Tiny but good. We’ve actually bought some designs from him.”

“Know anything about what he was working on?”

“Sleep, probably. We’re all working on sleep these days. 40 million scrips were filled last year.”

“What does that mean?” Neal asked.

“40 million prescriptions for sleep medication were filled last year. That’s up over 50 percent since 2000. And the curve is going skywards.”

“Why?” Neal asked.

“Because nobody can do it anymore. It’s worse than an epidemic, it’s a fact of life. The company that nails the right pill, the one that can handle chronic and can maintain wakefulness the next day, will walk on rivers of gold.”

“Why can’t people sleep anymore, Doctor Degner?”

“Who knows. Anxiety, depression, 24 hour work schedules. Endless light disrupting the diurnal. A constant buzz of stimulation seeping through the vast fiber-optic network that’s buried beneath us. Who knows.”

“Something wrong with this world, isn’t there Doctor?” Ben asked.

“Wrong? No, I wouldn’t say that. We’re revved up, speeded up, raring to go,” he said, and this time his smile was softer, more genuine. “We get going and then we can’t slow it down at night. The juice just keeps flowing. Maybe someday we’ll be able to do without sleep altogether. Just a matter of time.”

“Aren’t there plenty of good sleeping pills on the market already, Doctor?” Neal asked.

“Some of them aren’t too bad, but none of them keep going long term, and all of them have nasty side-effects. Drug-induced sleep still never completely satisfies. We’re aiming for long term, no sides, and so’s everyone else in the Square.”

“And what about you, Dr. Degner? How’s your sleep,” Ben asked

Degner stared at him quizzically for a moment before he responded. “Like a baby. Only need five a night, and I get them without fail. And no drugs.”

“Congratulations. And where were you last night?”

Degner looked puzzled, and then his face broke into the smirk version of his smile. “Am I a suspect?” He chuckled.

“Just a routine question. We’re trying to get a complete picture.”

“Are you now? Well, I’ll give you that piece of your puzzle. I was here until 10, 10:30, and then I went straight home. I have a condo on Marina Bay over in Quincy. And a house in Carmel. California, that is. And a small place in the South of France. Which I don’t get to use nearly enough.”

“And can anybody verify your whereabouts?”

“Some other people were in the office, but only until about 9.”

“And at home?”

“Nope. Alone. I’m a monk, Detective. An ascetic.” He nearly winked.

“Do you own a pistol, Doctor Degner?” Ben asked.

Neal looked shocked, but Degner looked Ben straight in the eye, and then pulled himself up slowly from his chair. He walked to his window and peered outwards. It was a tall man’s trick that Ben knew well and had used often. “A few, as a matter of fact. A small collection. What caliber are you looking for.”

“A .22.”

“Only one of those at the moment. A Beretta Cheetah. Compact, 23 ounces, 3.8 inch barrel, wood stock. Not a bad little piece.”

“Doctor, why do you have handguns?”

“Target practice, which I enjoy, and protection. I’m a very valuable commodity, and I leave work late at night. Did the same in California. I’ve got the proper license, don’t worry. Do you want see what I’m carrying now? A .38 Glock miniature Spree with a leather grip. I can show it to you. I only take it out of the desk, which is locked, when I leave at night. Or would you like me to get my .22 for you? You’ll see it hasn’t been fired in some time.”

“No thank you Doctor.”

Degner’s face grew exaggeratedly grave. “How’s Fern?”

“Do you know her?”

“Oh yeah,” he said. He enunciated the last syllable as if it were a delicious morsel and he wanted to taste it. “We go way back, Fern and I. She worked for me in California. Before she met Brian. She was a pretty good chemist herself, but gave it all up when she met Brian. Beautiful woman. I was surprised when we all ended up here in Boston.”

“This is Cambridge, Doctor,” Ben reminded him.

“Right, Cambridge.”

“Were you ever involved with her, Dr. Degner,” Ben asked. Neal looked at him in surprise.

“Not bad, Detective! Yes, we had a little fling. Very little. I guess I wasn’t her type. A little too tall, I’m afraid. You understand the problem, right Detective?”

“When did your affair with Fern Mortensen begin, and when did it end? And when did you see her last here in Boston?”

Degner answered the questions dutifully, and while he was explaining that they had dated for a couple of months, six years ago, he seemed to go on the defensive. He had seen Fern, together with Brian, a few weeks or months ago at a charity affair held in the lobby of the Epochal building. But it was only the second time since they both had emigrated east.

“She’s not an easy woman, you know.”

“Why’s that?”

“She has a bit of a temper. Sullen at times. But very, very pretty.”

“Were you having sexual relations with her?”

“Oh yeah,” he said, with exactly the same intonation he had used with these words a moment earlier. He looked wistful and he paused. Then he said, “wonderful woman. Very intense. She was one of my great success stories, you know.”

“How so?”

“She suffered from a bad case of depression when she was working for me. Prozac didn’t help. Promazine knocked her out for five days. She took Zyprexa and

within a week she was hearing voices, and ended up in the hospital. She wasn't doing too well with Risperidone either. The doctors told her that she was whigging out, but I had a hunch. Serotonin reuptake inhibitors should have helped her, but they weren't doing the job. I figured that the problem might not be in her head, but in her liver. You see, enzymes in the liver dictate how our bodies break down medication. Some people have too many, so they metabolize the medication too quickly and the body clears it out before it can do any good. Others have too little enzyme, or none at all, and so the drugs build up. Results can be toxic. I figured this might be happening to Fern, so I told her to get off the drugs entirely, and just take a mild tranquilizer. You know what? She began to relax and she started to feel better. We tested her, and sure enough she was lacking the CYP2D6 enzyme; that's why the Risperidone went bad on her."

"You're a pharmaceutical salesman but you took her off drugs?"

"Yup. Well-being of the patient comes first." Degner smirked. "The best part was that she was so grateful that she slept with me. Which was very, very nice. Plus, I got started on a line of research that will end up in really big bucks some day: personalized medicine. Figuring out how a patient will react to a drug before they take it. A quick genetic test, and we can customize the scrip, and reduce the sides. Did you know that 100,000 people die each year from side-effects of medications? That's criminal."

"Why'd your relationship end?" Ben asked.

"In the final analysis, she just didn't like me much." The Degner smirk reappeared. "Plus, she threatened to file sexual harrassment charges against me. But that was crazy. Our relationship was completely above-board. Everybody in the office knew we were going out. I didn't harrass her, or threaten her. I do a good job keeping work and

my private life separate. But I learned my lesson. Now I restrict myself to other people's employees."

"Did Brian have any enemies? Anyone who might try to harm him?"

"Why would anyone want to harm him? He was a scientist, after all. Spent his days behind a computer screen."

"But scientific research has powerful consequences, doesn't it."

"Certainly. And we're trying to capitalize on them right now."

"So, couldn't Brian be working on something that might effect others? Could anyone have wanted to stop his research?"

"Why would anyone want to do that?"

"What about a competitor? What if he were on to something that would hurt another company? A new product line. A new drug."

"Don't be ridiculous!" Degner roared. "We play the game hard, but not that way. We kill our competition, but only in the market. I'm surprised at you Detective. You didn't seem quite so crude when I first met you."

"When you get to know me a little better you'll see just how crude I am. Doctor." Ben stood up to remind him that he was just as tall. Degner didn't seem impressed.

"Look, I'm awfully busy. Send my condolences to Fern, would you. I'll send her some flowers."

"Thank you for your time, Dr. Degner. We'll be in touch, if we need anything else."

"Jesus, the bombing in London was terrible, wasn't it Detective?"

Neither Ben nor Neal responded.

Leaving the building and entering the liquid glare of the late afternoon sun, Ben said to Neal, “come on, I want to show you something.”

“What?”

“Don’t worry, it’s just across the street.”

“Oh man, too hot to walk.”

“Trust me.”

Ben led Neal on a walk of a few blocks until they reached an enormous building which instead of walls had cascades of falling shapes, and instead of a roof had dizzying geometric outcrops. With not a single right angle in sight it looked like no other building in the neighborhood. It was the Stata Center, the home of MIT’s computer science and artificial intelligence departments.

“Dag, this thing is weird,” Neal said as he gazed at the building glimmering in the heat. “Looks like it’s falling apart. That chunk over there looks like a milk jug. What is this place, a joke?”

“No joke. Built by the most famous architect in the world. Frank Gehrey.”

“Was he stoned when he made it?”

Ben chuckled. “I doubt it.”

“Well, doesn’t look right to me. But it’s different, I’ll give him that.”

Neal and Ben sat on a shaded bench gazing at the Stata center, which to Ben seemed nothing but sad. He thought that there should be students milling around, talking, laughing, touching each other. This was, at least, the scene he remembered from decades ago in Harvard Yard and on the steps of the Widener library. Although he had only

watched the others laugh and talk and touch each other, and had never once been part of such a group.

“Come on, Ben, you don’t really think a hotshot like that would have done Brian, do you?”

“Don’t know.”

“You think he still had a thing going with Fern?”

“Don’t know.”

“Are you making him a suspect?”

“We’re all suspect. Let’s just find out as much as we can about Michael Degner and Epochal Drug. But before we do that, let’s go visit Bernie Olen.”

Neal, his brow glistening with sweat, looked at his partner sorrowfully. “Oh man,” was all he said.

Ben and Neal had to retrace their steps because Bernie Olen also lived in the South End. The hot July day, which was gradually becoming hotter and more humidly wretched as the sun headed west, made the drive difficult for both of them, and neither said a word. But when they got to the Longfellow Bridge, the Charles River was speckled with the white sails of dozens of small sailboats, and it looked shimmeringly beautiful. It was a rare moment when Ben actually felt some affection for his old town that was baking in the sun. Boston was most itself when it was on the water. Ben remembered summer days from his youth, when he had gone to Carson Beach in South Boston with his pals, or run around Castle Island with his brother Micky as his parents took a stroll, and he almost smiled. But any glimmer of good feeling he may have had dissipated quickly when Neal turned the radio on and they heard the latest on the London bombings. Degner was right: the body count was up to 43. He was relieved when they finally stopped in front of the beautiful brownstone that was Bernie's address and got out of the car.

Unlike Fern, Bernie opened the door immediately when Ben identified himself as a police officer. They were greeted by a short but powerfully built 45 year old man with a head and thick necked that seemed a bit too large for the rest of his body. He was wearing a pair of gym shorts and a sleeveless tee-shirt whose sole purpose was to reveal his bulging biceps. His thinning hair was dyed a light brown, nearly red. His face looked ravaged.

“Mr. Olen, I'm Detective Kaplan and this is my partner, Detective Simpson.”

The muscle-man just stared.

“Should we call you Mister Olen or Doctor?”

“Don’t care. Someone shot Brian. I know he’s dead.” Bernie fell silent, closed his eyes, covered his ears with his hands and pushed them hard. Abruptly he stopped and said, “I read about it on the Internet this morning. I can’t talk right now.”

“Mr. Olen, I know it’s difficult, but anything you tell us might help us find Brian’s killer.”

“Tell you? What can I tell you? Brian and I worked late last night, left the lab together, did what we usually do.”

“Which is?”

“I can’t talk Detective. I’m sorry. Can you come back tomorrow? I’m a wreck.” Bernie did look wrecked, far more distraught than Fern had been.

“Please Mr. Olen, your friend is dead. Information gained within the first hours of an investigation is often the most helpful. Can you tell us anything at all? Anything strange or unusual happen last night?”

“Nothing, nothing I can think of.” Bernie seemed to be trying. “We left work around 8, took the red line to Park Street, then the Green to Copley. Then we walked. Brian liked to walk. Said it relaxed him.”

“So, let me get the schedule straight. You left work at 8?”

Bernie Olen hesitated, looked pained. “Maybe it was 9. I’m not sure. We work all the time, so I lose track of it. Maybe 8:30. You know what? I’m not sure, and I don’t care. I want to be left alone right now.”

“Where did you and Brian separate?” Neal asked. “I mean, which one of you got home first?”

“Me. I’m closer to the T.” Bernie lived on Fairfield Street, which was in-between Copley Square and Brian’s condo. “Brian would drop me off at my place and go on home.”

“And then what did Brian do?”

“He went home, what else?”

“Do you know this for a fact?”

“No,” he said thoughtfully. “I guess I don’t. I went inside and went to bed.”

“And this would have been, what, 9 o’clock?”

“I told you, I’m not sure. Please, no more questions. I’m not feeling well at all. I think I might have a migraine coming on. Please go away.”

“Has Brian been having any trouble at work?”

“Trouble?” Bernie paused, and again tried to think straight. “No, not that I know of.”

“Any trouble outside of work?”

“Outside of work? What do you mean?”

“Anybody bothering him?”

“Bothering him? No. You have to understand, we don’t do much, don’t see other people much. We work and we come home. I work out, he goes home to see his kids. That’s about it.”

“What about Michael Degner? Of Epochal Pharmaceuticals.”

“I know who Michael Degner is, and what company he runs. Everybody in the Square does. I also know that Degner tried to steal Brian away from us. Offered him mucho dinero to leave us. But Brian refused. I was very proud of him when he did. He showed his mettle.”

“When was that.”

“I don’t know. A few months ago.”

Bernie started to cry, but he caught himself. “Degner even invited Brian out to his house. But Brian didn’t go. Degner put pressure on him, I do know that, but then he gave up. It hasn’t been an issue for a long time.”

“Anything else you can think of, Mr. Olen? Did Brian have any enemies at all?”

Bernie sadly replied, “No, no enemies. He was just a scientist. And a sweet guy. That’s it.”

“Thank you Mr. Olen. If you think of anything, please, give us a call,” Neal said as he handed Bernie his card.

Bernie nodded as if in a trance, and slowly closed the door on them.

Neal and Ben left the apartment and once again were standing on a hot sidewalk.

“He’s gay, you know,” Neal said.

“Gotcha,” Ben replied. “So what?”

“Just a point, that’s all. Gotta amass the details. You never know what piece will complete the puzzle. Context, Detective, context.”

“Don’t fuck with me, Neal. It’s too hot.”

“I won’t fuck with you, Ben. I’m not gay, after all.”

Ben chuckled. “You think Olen’s dicking someone important to the case?”

“Maybe. Who do you think?” Neal asked.

“Casper? Maybe Bernie slept his way to the top.”

“Doubt that. So, what do we do? Just file Mr. Olen’s sexual orientation away?”

“Yup. Much more important to get the timeline straight. What time did they leave work? Brian was killed between 10 and 11. Bernie has him getting home earlier than that. If he went home. An hour’s missing, and we have to find it.”

“Maybe it’s hiding under the table.”

Ben looked befuddled. “What’re you talking about?”

Neal smiled, as a sweet memory swept over his face. “That’s what we tell Derrick. That there’s a rabbit hiding under the table. A nice rabbit who wants to tickle his feet.”

“You actually say stuff like that? That’s amazing,” Ben said with conviction.

“But enough with the fun. Let’s get back to the station. I need to put your high-tech mind to work.”

The joint was gloomy. The TV was flashing images from London. Two subways and a bus. Well coordinated. All the fingerprints of Al Qaeda at work. Bloodied and shell shocked passengers were being led out of the tube and into the street, where they glanced at the camera with mute incomprehension. Everyone in the station, cops and civilians alike, seemed themselves to be in shock. They were walking more slowly than usual, talking more quietly. There was none of the usual, aggressive banter.

Ben said hello to Sally, who had been staring at the screen. To break the gloom he asked her his standard question: “You watch *Law and Order* last night?”

“Of course. In fact, I watched two.”

“They get the bad guy?”

“They always get the bad guy?”

“Did they convict him?”

“One yes, one no.”

“Not a bad day’s work.”

Sally smiled, so Ben continued. “You’d better be careful. You’re going to know more about police work than me soon. Then I’ll have to take orders from you instead of Neal.”

She laughed. “Heard you collared the perp on this morning’s murder?”

“Collared someone, that’s for sure.”

“You don’t think he did it?”

“They don’t let me think on this job, Sally, you know that. I just do what I’m told.”

“And what about the London bombings?”

“You want me to solve that one too, Sal?” Ben said sadly.

“No, Ben.” She sounded annoyed. “Just wanted to know if you heard anything. It’s terrible what these people do.”

“Yes it is.”

“What do they want?”

“For us to go away. To go back to the good old days when they ran the show.”

Ben tried to summon up what he knew about the Ottoman Empire. He recalled a course he had taken at Harvard on the history of the Middle East. He didn’t remember much about it, other than the professor was an aging cynic who seemed to know everything about the Arab world and who had taught him that decades before Osama bin Laden came on the scene Muslims had been aching for a strong man, a Caliph, a big guy to lead them back to unity and world prominence. Ben had liked the course and thought it explained a lot about cats like Nasser and more recently Saddam Hussein.

“Are we going to stop them Ben?” Sally asked.

“I hope so. But it might take a while.”

“Keep up the good work, detective.”

“I’ll do my best, Sal. Anything back from the lab on the gun we found on the perp?”

“Not yet. Everyone’s glued to the TV.”

Neal also wanted to watch the London Bombings show, but Ben insisted that, even though they were both getting tired, their next job was to find out as much as they could about this biotech crowd into whose midst they had stumbled. Most of this work would be done on-line, so here the burden would fall on Neal. He went right to work and within twenty minutes started giving Ben material to read.

Michael Degner had a Ph.D. in molecular biology from Stanford. His earliest published research was in the protein TNF-alpha, which fights infections. Like other such proteins, it could go berserk and turn against its own body. These self-attacks were the auto-immune diseases, such as arthritis, which brought with them a great deal of inflammation and pain. When he worked for Vivraflex, a pharmaceutical company located in San Francisco, Degner had led a team that had figured out how to block TNF-alpha, and the drug that resulted, Arthropax, was an effective arthritis medication and became a huge success. Its sales totalled nearly \$2 billion in 2003 alone, and Degner had by now earned millions.

Degner had branched off on his own soon after the success of Arthropax, and founded Epochal Pharmaceuticals in 1992. Soon after, in 1996, it acquired a company called Centurion which, almost as soon as it belonged to Degner, had turned out a winner, a cancer drug, Tumothan. With this success, Epochal bought up three smaller pharmaceutical companies and relocated to Cambridge in 2000.

The Internet wasn't as forthcoming about Degner's personal life, although he did pop up in the news now and again. He had, for example, won a pistol competition in 1997. His divorce also got some press on the gossip pages. His wife had put him through graduate school by working as an emergency room nurse, but he had dumped her when

he became rich. The fight was nasty, but Degner had somehow managed to emerge with most of his bank account intact.

Bernie and Brian had worked together at Technogen, a pharmaceutical company in San Jose, for three years, when Bernie was recruited by Casper to come East and work at Elpigen. He was single, and openly gay. His partner, a man named Bruce Bowen, had been one of the first casualties of the AIDS epidemic. Bernie was a successful scientist, and he apparently played a role in persuading Brian to join up with Casper and move to Boston.

Neal and Ben, both exhausted by a long and painful day, quit around 5:30. They had amassed some facts but nothing surprising or helpful. They decided to call it a day because Neal was anxious to get home. Alice, he was sure, would be upset by the bombings, and he wanted, as he put it, “to be there for her.” They left work feeling unsatisfied, and chatted for a while outside the police station before parting ways. Ben smoked, and Neal looked on disapprovingly.

By Ben’s lights, their story, if there was going to be one, hadn’t gotten off the ground. There was Stringbean Bennett, and that was it. He had the wallet and the gun and nothing that resembled an alibi. Still, it was Degner who had made the stronger impression. His arrogance was palpable and he was ice cold. Bright as a whip, he seemed to have the conscience of a whip as well. But could he possibly have killed Brian? They asked themselves that question, but had to admit that it made no sense. Unless it had something to do with Fern. She was beautiful enough to dislodge a few neurons, and maybe even get men acting crazy. But crazy enough to shoot a man through the heart? They didn’t pretend to know, so they said good-bye.

Ben wasn't meeting Holly till 8, so he had no excuse not to visit his father, whom he hadn't seen in a week. If he hurried he could get there just before dinner, and then eat with the old man in the dining room of the Workman's Circle Assisted Living Center, which everyone there called "The Work." For a reason he couldn't quite understand, his father, not normally given to invitation, liked his son to join him for dinner. Ben wondered whether this was because he could criticize him in public. Still, time passed a bit more quickly in The Work's antiseptic cafeteria than it did anywhere else in the building, so it was an easier way to visit him.

Ben drove the Volvo to the shabby, three-storied, dull brick building close to Jamaica Pond. As usual on a summer day, his father was sitting on what passed for the front porch, a slab of concrete underneath a tin overhang in the front of the building. He was sitting next to two cronies, both of whom were asleep. But the old man, Abe Kaplan, was not. He was peering hawkishly into the parking lot, guarding it with his usual fierceness even though he couldn't make out objects from a distance. It was only when Ben was standing right before him that he recognized him.

"Hey Boytshik!" he said with something resembling warmth in his voice. "It's the right-winger! What brings you here?"

"Just came to say hello Pop. And to check your mail."

"Mail schmail! You gonna stay for dinner? We eat in a few minutes. So, you gonna stay?"

"Sure Pop, I'll stay for dinner."

The old man was made of diminishing bones covered by once taut muscles that had gone slack. He had a large head, and a permanent scowl etched into his face by angry wrinkles. His hands were enormous, and his eyes red and watery. Abe woke his two neighbors, Edith and Sarah, and told them that his son the right-winger was here. For at least the hundredth time he asked Ben if he had met Edith, his lady-friend of the past few months. They had known each other in their previous lives, when she was a social worker, and he a printer, and both were activists in the Boston left-wing community. Ben greeted the two old women with as much enthusiasm as he could muster, which wasn't much. He didn't worry that his artificiality would insult them, since neither was able to process much information from the outside world, even when they were fully awake.

Abe Kaplan proudly identified himself as a Red. He had been active in labor unions, summoned by the House Unamerican Activities Committee during the 50's, marched against the war in Vietnam in the 60's, turned his attention to urban poverty and local Roxbury issues during the violent and frightening times of the 70's and 80's. The fantastic explosion of prosperity of the 90's meant nothing to him, except as yet another occasion to express his outrage. He seemed to have been affected not at all by September 11, at least not by September 11, 2001. For Ben's mother, Jenny, who like Edith had also been a social worker and an activist, had died on September 11, 2002. Jenny was the tall one in the family; big-boned and stout, at 5' 11" she had two inches on her husband. She was an aloof, distant woman who rarely spoke to Abe, at least in front of Ben and his younger brother Micky. Her real life, Ben had figured out, occurred outside the home, in her social service agency and her various political action committees. Unlike Abe,

however, she never yelled at, or even criticized, Ben. She just took care of him, even if from a distance.

Abe was born in the West End of Boston, a neighborhood that was completely demolished in the early 50's to make room for urban renewal. His parents, whose anglicized names became Morris and Shirley, both came from Russia and were Reds themselves. They had been forced to leave the West End and had moved next to Abe and Jenny in Roxbury, where the Kaplans were the only white families on the block. But Ben hadn't gotten to know his grandparents very well, since they both died within a year of moving.

When Ben had decided to leave Harvard and go to Vietnam instead, his father had exploded in a rage that still had not dissipated. He had threatened to disown his son, which hadn't displeased Ben, and when he returned to Boston from his tour of duty, unscathed but disillusioned, the two barely saw each for nearly thirty years. But after Jenny died, they had been forced to spend time together. Ben had taken over Abe's financial affairs, a job the father would much have preferred that Micky had assumed. To his amazement, however, the old man had allowed Ben to sell his house and move him into The Work. But he still talked favorably about Micky, Ben's older brother, who by his lights was a big success: a Yale graduate, he was a labor lawyer and political activist in Los Angeles, who rarely made it back East.

“So, you get any bad guys this week?”

“Just one.”

“Some poor black kid, right?”

“Yup.”

“You think those kids have a chance in this system? Why don’t you help these poor bastards instead of locking them up. The system chews them up.”

“I understand that Pop.”

“You harrass those kids, don’t you? You look for black kids to arrest, don’t you?”

“Nope.”

“Ach, cops never did nobody any good ever. Goddamn cops. They beat me, you know. Back in in the 30’s. Big Irish cops, carried truncheons. Beat the hell out of us demonstrators. Cop bastards.”

“You hear about the bombings in London, Pop.”

“Heard? Of course I heard. What do you think I am, deaf? God damn war in Iraq. Blair and Bush, two bourgeoisie sons of bitches!”

Ben was grateful that he could agree, at least in part: “It’s a lousy war.”

“Vietnam was lousy too. And you hadda go fight. Threw away your education for that disaster.”

“It was a disaster,” Ben had to agree. “But you were in the army too.”

“That was different. We were fighting the fascists.” The old man paused, lost somewhere in his memory. “It’s a shitty life.”

Abe was 92, his legs throbbed constantly with pain, he couldn’t see well enough to read, and his hearing was bad. Worst of all, from his point of view, he was dependent on other people. But despite his protests, he had accomodated himself to The Work. The residents, almost all women, came from similar backgrounds as he: old Jewish left-wingers, veterans of the labor and anti-war movements, who, when they had the energy to do so, knew how to complain.

“But it’s not so bad here,” Ben said. “You got Edith.” The old woman, who had not yet fully awoken from her nap, smiled pleasantly at the sound of her name but didn’t say anything. “And Sarah. And Irv.” Irv was Abe’s one male friend in the place. He too had been a printer.

As Ben sat on the front porch with his father and two aged friends, he let his face absorb the warmth of the sun. When he closed his eyes the full force of the fatigue that was his constant but usually unobtrusive companion struck him. He fell immediately asleep and for a minute he was back in the basement of his childhood home with his brother Micky, and they were looking for something. When Abe woke him up by grabbing him by arm, he knew immediately what it was.

The truncheon was kept hidden in the basement of their Roxbury house. Or so their father said. Despite their several attempts to find it, Micky and Ben never had. But their father made threats about it often and in the midst of their worst, boyish behavior, they were reminded of its existence. Back then, the very word “truncheon” had made Ben pause with fear. It conjured up images of “fascist thugs,” another phrase his father used often. As a child Ben had no clear idea what a fascist thug was. He only knew from his father’s stories that they were cruel and stupid and would use their truncheons to beat peaceful and good people. Their favorite target, as far as young Ben could gather, were Jews and demonstrators. His father, a Jew and a demonstrator, hated them...and so, therefore, did Ben. And yet there in the basement of his home, along with the cheap TV and the two small desks his father had built for his sons, was hidden a truncheon. Or so Abe told them.

Holding his son's arm tightly on the front porch of the Work, the old man nearly shouted, "The bastards kicked my father out of his house!" This had recently become Abe's refrain. The West End where he had spent his childhood was vivid in his mind, more so even than the Roxbury home where he had lived for nearly fifty years. "We lived on Charles Street, you know. Could walk right over to the river. They didn't have a highway back then. Just a street. Ach, it was beautiful. We didn't have a lot of money, but we sure had a lot of fun. They had concerts on the river. Free concerts, for the people. Bastards tore down my neighborhood. Broke my father's heart. They kicked him out of his house, just like the Nazis. They killed him. He was a radical, you know. From Russia. We used to sing songs together. He had a beautiful voice. A real leftie. Like me."

"Me too," Sarah piped up.

"Me too," added Edith.

"He didn't want to move, but the bastards made him do it! It killed him, that's what it did. Bastards."

At 6:15, the time when the second seating in the dining room began, Ben excused himself in order to pay a visit to Abe's room. As usual, clothes, including a couple of pairs of soiled underpants, were strewn over nearly every available surface. The old man couldn't bend to pick them up and seemed uninterested in the new hamper Ben had purchased for him. There were crumpled paper towels on the floor as well. Ben wasn't quite sure what his father did with all these towels, and he didn't particularly want to find out. The bathroom smelled bad, and Ben rapidly cleaned the toilet, and emptied the foul smelling trash basket, which was also filled with paper towels, most of them wet. He then

checked each of his father's appliances—the electric razor, the radio, the cassette player by his bed, his cordless phone, all of which he had purchased for Abe—to make sure they were plugged in. When he was done, he searched the usual places, the coffee table, the couch, the desk, for mail. As usual, he found a couple of bills and some junk. But as he was looking Ben found a letter written by Edith, Abe's girlfriend.

Dear Abe:

The day has become boring, dull, undesirable! So, I shall leave here and go up to my room where many interests abound.

Now I shall write larger-- so you can read more easily!

Yesterday you declared that you were going to call Ben and ask him to take you see a Dr. who might be able to do something for your legs. Oh, I was so happy! You were finally doing something!

Nothing came of that! When I asked you yesterday, you brushed it off—with total impatience!

Our beautiful times have come to an end! You don't want to be with me so there's nothing to hold it together—nothing!

I have loved being with you. You have so much of beauty in you. It's so sad to see all of what we know to be possible, to just being thrown away!

So be it. Edith

Ben chuckled when he finished reading, for he had just left Abe and Edith sitting happily next to each other, their shoulders merged, on the front porch. Apparently, neither had any memory of their break-up and Edith no longer seemed upset with, or

perhaps even aware of, Abe's sourness and his contempt for doctors. Ben took the letter with him so that neither she nor his father would remember what had transpired, and left the room to go to dinner. Before he entered the dining room he washed his hands vigorously.

The Work's dining room resembled a school cafeteria, even though waiters brought the residents their food, and as Ben had learned it had the same sort of social dynamics as a high-school. There were cliques, hurt feelings, jockeying for the best tables. It suited his father perfectly. Abe shared a table with Irv, Edith, and Sarah, and he pulled up an extra chair for Ben. The entire kitchen staff was Mexican, and when Julian Tavarez, the cheerful young man Abe had gotten to know best, came by to take his order, he gave the kid his usual spiel: "They pay you a decent wage in this joint? You got benefits? Make sure they give you benefits."

"I got benefits Mr. Kaplan."

"You got enough benefits? You gonna go to school?"

"Yes, Mr. Kaplan," Julian said jovially. "I take English class."

"Good for you. You gotta know the language. That's the only way to organize."

"Okay, Mr. Kaplan. You want tuna or egg?"

Abe didn't hear the question.

"Tuna Mr. Kaplan? Or egg?" Julian was patient, and almost affectionate.

"Tuna. But go easy on the mayo."

"Okay. You want the hamburg steak?" he asked Ben, "Or chicken?"

When Ben told him he wanted the steak, Julian went away smiling.

“They pay these guys bupkiss. Don’t give them no benefits, nothing. We should close this shop down.”

Irv and Edith nodded their heads in agreement.

“Pop, this place is run by the Workmen’s Circle. They pay them the best they can. They teach them English right here. They’ve got a daycare center here for their kids. They give them good health benefits and vacations. What more do you want them to do?”

“They don’t teach them nothing. They exploit them. Bastards.”

The old man didn’t cease his tirade until Julian brought their dinners.

“So, you get any bad guys today?”

“Just one.”

“Poor black kid I bet. Probably wasn’t doing nothing except trying to make a living.”

“No, we think he may have shot and killed a man.”

“You arrest any communists today?”

“Nope, no communists.”

“Cops always arresing communists. We didn’t do nothing illegal, and the bastards would arrest us, beat us. Bastards. Nothing worse than a cop.”

Ben was silent. He had heard it before.

“I get three meals a day in this joint. And they accommodate me. No meat. I became a vegetarian 30 years ago, when Micky did. Ain’t touched a bit of meat since. You know how they raise cows in this country? Factories! Bastard farmers. My father left Russia because he couldn’t own no land. They didn’t let Jews own no land.”

“I know.”

“Micky and I, we haven’t touched meat for thirty years. And you, you gonna kill yourself with the meat. Your heart’s gonna explode. Wait and see.”

Ben didn’t reply, but he looked at his watch whose second hand was revolving all too slowly. Julian seemed to take forever to bring their dinners, but when he did Ben joined the old folk in silently eating his. As usual, his father spilled a good bit of his tuna salad onto his shirt and pants. Ben didn’t have the heart, or the energy, to say anything to him, but at least he no longer felt annoyed with Abe. As soon as finished his dessert, and had two sips of the pale brown liquid they called coffee at the Work, he excused himself and told his father that he had to get back to the office. To his amazement, the old man said, “that’s peachy,” and he smiled. “You come back tomorrow.”

“I’ll try, Pop.”

“Good boy.”

Before getting into the Volvo, Ben lit a cigarette and let his session with his father sink in. Even though he was hardly basking in warmth, he was pleasantly surprised that he felt nothing negative. His father’s last words echoed in his ears, and he smiled before inhaling a last breath of smoke.

Ben Kaplan had solved the problem of sex, and her name was Holly Laurent. He didn't know if this was her real name, and he had never asked. She was recommended to him by Joe Greenberg, a boyhood friend of his brother's, a man who had stayed in Boston and had, like Micky, also had become a lawyer, although he worked for the other side: commercial real estate. Joe was convinced that his own visits to professionals had saved his marriage. He could release his urges, which as he often told Ben were powerful and plentiful, and then return home to be a good husband and father. He gave Ben Holly's phone number. After thoroughly screening him, and then interviewing him in person, she had accepted him as a client.

Holly shared Joe's philosophy. She took herself to be performing a public service, and Ben had to admit that some of her stories seemed to confirm this. His favorite was of the judge who needed to be spanked. His wife wouldn't do it, Holly would. When she was finished, he would go home and watch TV with his kids.

Holly was a well breasted, athletic woman, tall and strong, with wavy brown hair down to her broad shoulders, and a straightforward, guileless look on her face. She wore the simple but carefully chosen clothes of a professional woman, and almost no make-up. When Ben met her in the bar of the Marsh Hotel, and greeted her with two European kisses, a casual onlooker might have thought that theirs was a more normal business meeting. Holly was confident and smart, and had come close to finishing a sociology

degree at a branch campus of a state university buried somewhere in the backwoods of Maine. She had, as she explained to Ben when they began to feel comfortable with each other, always loved sex, and firmly believed that no sexual impulse was bad. She ran out of money during college and being cash starved led her to a small-time pimp in her rural town. Sharing her hard earned income with a lazy profiteer offended her deeply, so she moved to Boston and set up shop on her own. She was a devotee of the health club, enjoyed eating expensive salads for lunch, and drinking cold white wine. She loved going to the movies and was a reader, although mostly of murder mysteries. Ben was impressed that even though he knew she was interested, she never asked him more than a cursory question about his work, and never pushed him for details. Holly was a woman of tact.

Their ritual, etched in stone, always began with a drink. The Marsh had once been distinguished, and even if it was now somewhat shabby, it still retained some of its old Boston flavor. Its bar was oak and long, a real bar which Ben liked it because it only had one TV screen, stuck high in the corner, easy to ignore but possible to check when the Red Sox were playing the first of a three-game series against the Yankees. Tonight's game was only in the second inning, and already the Red Sox were ahead, four to nothing. The bartender, who recognized Ben and Holly and understood perfectly well why they were in the hotel, told him that Trot Nixon had hit an inside-the-park homer to drive in three runs. The centerfielder, who wasn't Bernie Williams, but whose name he didn't know, had come flying in to catch a sinking line drive. It went under his glove and rolled all the way back to the centerfield wall. Nixon didn't even have to slide when he reached home.

As always, Holly ordered her martini, Ben his scotch, and they played a short game of catch-up. Ben learned what movies Holly had seen—"War of the Worlds," which she didn't like, and "March of the Penguins," which she did—how often she had been to the gym, and what she was reading. She told him that she had taken a chance on a book that was not a mystery, a funny book called *Health Cares*. It was about a crazy philosophy professor from Iowa. Ben was interested and asked her a few questions, but she had only begun it, so couldn't tell him much. When she asked him how his work was, he simply answered "fine." He asked her if anything new had emerged on the bombings in London.

"They think it was suicide bombers. Probably British citizens. At least that's what they're saying on TV. I don't get it Ben. How could anyone just blow up innocent people?"

At first, Ben didn't answer the question, for it was one that would never have occurred to him. "People are shit."

This time Holly was the one who fell silent. When she saw Ben staring into his drink, she announced that it was time for them to repair to the bedroom. For some reason, she liked the word "repair."

Their pattern in the bedroom was as ritualized as their drink at the bar. They would undress, and then make love quickly in the most ordinary manner. Then each would move as far away from the other as the bed would allow, and fall deeply asleep for an hour or so, a rare event for both of them. When they awoke they would make love again. This required effort on Ben's part, but Holly was expert in coaxing him along into the second act. When they were done, they would each take a shower and then they

would leave the room together, Holly having deposited the envelope Ben had given her in her purse. Their tryst would typically take two or three hours.

This evening conformed to the pattern, with only one exception. This time, when Ben fell into his sleep he not only dreamed, but he remembered his dream, and it was about Fern. She was jogging on the Charles River esplanade, dressed in running shorts, her luxurious black hair trailing her in the wind, her thin and muscular legs and arms churning, the cleavage between her breasts glistening with sweat. The look he had seen on her face at her apartment, lost, deep into herself, searching, in shock, was gone. This time she was flushed with effort, and looked radiant and joyful, as if the simple motions of her strong body were cause for celebration. Ben was behind her, in his typical day job clothes, khaki pants, a sports jacket, working his long legs, trying futilely to catch up to her.

“Collective responsibility. A suicide bastard blows himself up on a bus, we find out who he was, and then we take out his mother and sisters. That’s the only way. Every time one of these bastards straps a bomb on himself he’ll know he’s not just blowing up a pack of infidels and himself, but he’s also killing his own mother. That’d stop a few of them.”

It was well after midnight, and Ben and Bobby were talking over glasses of brandy at Bobby’s small one-bedroom apartment in Dorchester, which is where, after leaving the Marsh Hotel, Ben had gone. Bobby didn’t sleep much, and was always glad to see him. He had flashed his trademark smile, small and crooked, when his old friend arrived unannounced at his door. “You’re not serious are you?” he asked Ben.

“Why not? Nothing else is going to work. Desperate measures for desperate times. Must be a Latin saying for that.”

“Leaving aside the moral questions for the moment, it sounds like the Israelis bulldozing Palestinian houses on the West Bank. You see how far that got them, don’t you?”

“Yeah I see. That was about the stupidest thing they ever did. You don’t take away people’s property. That just gets them mad. If you’re going to retaliate, you kill the whole family. You don’t want anybody left coming after you. But still, even with their stupidity, things are pretty quiet in Israel these days. Or haven’t you noticed?”

“What I’ve noticed is that they have made themselves a generation of implacable enemies.”

“Nice word, ‘implacable.’ You must have gone to college, kid. The Arabs would hate the Jews no matter what. At least Sharon manages to keep a lid on the violence. Every time a fucking Arab kills a Jew that bastard knows his people are going to pay a big price. We do nothing, except bomb the hell out of Iraq and invite every would-be terrorist in the world to go there in order to get trained. I say go after the bastards’ mothers. We’ve got a war on our hands, and it’s one we may lose.”

“You’ve noticed, of course, that a lot of those mothers are awfully proud of what their sons have done.”

“Yeah, but they don’t want to die. And their sons don’t want to kill them. So we have to do the job for them.”

“Great plan Ben! You should have finished college, maybe you would have learned something.”

“I know, I know, I’m being a moron. But I just can’t take this shit anymore, Bobby. I hate these bastards and I feel like I have to do something.”

Bobby smiled again. When he and Ben had been roommates at Harvard, they often had conversations just like this one. Back then, Ben was staunchly in favor of the war in Vietnam, and would become furious at the peaceniks who frolicked around the campus half-naked, hair dripping down to their shoulders, sex-crazed rich kids, and he would launch into mad tirades against them. But he never got angry at Bobby Doyle, even though he too protested against the war.

By his senior year Bobby Doyle, local scholarship kid from Dorchester, was the starting point guard for the Harvard Crimson. Ben Kaplan, local scholarship kid from Roxbury, who had spent his two years on the team sitting on the bench, was in Vietnam. They had not only shared a room, but also a deep feeling of strangeness in the land of the privileged few. Bobby managed to finish it out, and had graduated with a degree in philosophy, the same major Ben had begun but, even though one of his professors thought he had a bit of talent, never finished. After his sophomore year Ben had had enough of what he called “Crimson bullshit” and so he enlisted in the Army.

To the surprise of all who knew him at Harvard except Ben, Bobby had gone to nursing school after graduation. He had worked in the psychiatric ward of Boston General Hospital for seven years, and then, needing a change, became the school nurse and assistant basketball coach at McKinley High School in Dorchester. When the head coach was killed by a bullet on a playground, a bullet that had been aimed at a fifteen year old kid, Bobby took over the helm. He had been there ever since, coaching basketball and teaching algebra. His quiet ways won the kids over. He was willing to enter into the lives of his black students, to get to know their families, usually their grandmothers, to tutor the students himself, to organize cookouts and trips to the Boston Garden, to fight with them to take their SATs, and to fight for them to earn scholarships to college. Plus, he knew basketball as only a low-scoring point guard who made his living dishing the ball to others and playing defense can ever know it. He understood that basketball was, above all else, a team game, and that defense came more from commitment and communication than from talent. He was passionate in his desire to win,

but, to his players at least, strangely indifferent to losing. He almost never got angry at them.

His greatest triumph had been in the semi-finals of the city tournament in 1998. The opponent was Roosevelt High from East Boston, the team favored to win the championship. McKinley got off to a terrible start, and by early in the second quarter had fallen behind by 18 points. Bobby called a timeout. Instead of berating his team for their failure to box their men out, or for shooting the ball too quickly, or for their lacksadaisical play on defense, he had pointed out to them that Roosevelt's coach, an overweight, sweating, dictator named Eddie Williams, was wearing black pants that were stained on the back with what looked like mustard. Bobby insisted that his players focus on those pants. As he never had before, he spoke in dialect and ranted about "fat-assed Williams' pitiful yellow pants." The crowd looked on in confusion as one by one the McKinley players cracked up. When the referee blew the whistle to resume play, Bobby gave his team only one short admonition: "go out there and play the game!" And they did. They won by 10. Their victory in the finals was a breeze, and for a while the saying, "where you get them pitiful pants?" became a catchphrase on the playgrounds.

"I thought you gave up the warrior schtick after Vietnam, Ben. I've been proud of you lately. And relieved that you were opposed to the War in Iraq."

"Don't get your hopes up, Bobby. I've got nothing against war, just stupid war."

"So, is this why you came over tonight Ben? To torture me with your latest theory about retributive justice?"

"Yes. No, not really. I got a kid of yours down at the station. Winfred Bennett. In for murder."

“Stringbean?” Bobby’s eyes lit up. “Oh no.”

“We think he killed a guy in the South End last night. Looks like a robbery gone bad.”

“I knew he was using and on the streets. Damn. The kid could’ve done something. We had a scholarship lined up for him, too. Northern Iowa. Division I, good place. I knew an assistant coach there who was willing to take a chance on String. Of course, he didn’t work on his SATs, but we still managed to find him a place at Burlington Community College, with a near guarantee that he’d go to Northern Iowa if he finished his two years there. Not a bad set up. In nowhere Iowa, far off the streets. Kid had a great first step, heck of a leaper, pretty good court sense, and a deadly jump shot. Didn’t play much D, of course, but he showed promise. Damn, damn, damn.”

“When did things start to go bad?”

“His junior year. He started to sell a little pot. Just a little. I thought I talked him out of it, and he promised me and his grandmother that he would stay clean. I stayed tight on him until the school year ended, but couldn’t keep track of him during that summer. I’d see him on the playgrounds once in a while, but mostly he was just drinking Colt 45. Then he jacked a car in the South End. We got lucky on that one, because he hadn’t used a gun. He got probation but he lost the scholarship to Burlington. So he stayed in the city and that was the beginning of the end. Shoplifting, occasional muggings, real low level stuff, but consistent. Finally, the judge had enough and gave him a couple of years.”

“Bad through and through?”

“No. Just dumb. Nice kid really. Used to take good care of his sisters. Mother was a crackhead. Grandmother was tough as nails. Great woman. Damn.”

“Could he have pulled the trigger?”

“Kid could have done anything if he was stoned enough. What was he like when you picked him up?”

“Stoned. Said he didn’t do it. Didn’t waver. Seemed adamant, actually. We found him with the victim’s wallet and a .22 pistol that probably shot the guy. But he claimed he found all of it on the street.”

“And he stuck to that story?”

“Yup.”

“Then he didn’t do it. String doesn’t have the moxie to systematically lie.”

“Couldn’t he have learned that in prison? It makes them hard.”

“Yeah, I know. But I don’t think so. String’s not the type to keep a secret. And he’s not a killer.”

“So *you* say.”

“So *I* say.”

Bobby poured Ben another glass of brandy, but kept it very short. He dropped a tiny bit into his own glass, which Ben knew he did from solidarity rather than thirst. He looked at his friend gratefully and, as he had so many times before, glanced around the living room admiringly. Neat and clean, but bereft of anything resembling ornament, it had only a few pieces of furniture: the well worn but still comfortable couch on which Ben was sitting, three straight-back wooden chairs that would have fit fine in an elementary school, and a small desk. The walls of the living room, however, were lined with bookshelves, all of them filled to the brim. The only other object that caught Ben’s

eye was a small cross above the entrance to the kitchen. He gulped down the brandy in his glass.

As they had so often before, the two men sat in comfortable silence, which Ben interrupted by asking, “You know the Tiant field in Peters Park?”

“Sure.”

“Guy was found in the dugout.”

“The dugout? Damn. You want another drink?”

“Sure.”

Bobby poured Ben another glass, and this time there was even less brandy than in the previous drink.

“You’re really pulling out all the stops tonight, aren’t you pal?”

“That’s me,” Bobby replied. “You gotta drive home, remember?”

“Home,” Ben echoed.

Back in his apartment, the clock nearing 2, Ben was sitting in his kitchen at his computer trying to find out what was happening in London. Lots of speculation, but no new information. Maybe timers, maybe suicides, maybe locals, maybe not. Death toll was close to fifty and would no doubt rise. Some bodies were still stuck inside the subway tunnel where the rats may already have begun their awful work. But those Londoners were resilient, and comparisons were already being made to the Blitz. Blair had done his best impression of Winston Churchill, and Bush had issued his standard bromides about bringing the bad guys to justice and standing firm. It was 8 a.m. in London, the buses were rolling, and people were going back to work. The Brits had been

told repeatedly that such an attack was inevitable. Did that make it hurt less? Ben had asked himself this question on many a grisly occasion. He shut the small computer down and closed its top.

Even though it was warm in his apartment, Ben took a long hot shower. While the stream of water was massaging his aching back, he realized that he had left his gun at Bobby's place. He cursed himself silently, but didn't worry. He had done this a dozen times before. He had a key to Bobby's apartment, and if his friend wasn't home the gun would be on his desk, waiting for him. He got into bed, picked up the book he was reading, a biography of George Washington, whom he had found to be a remarkably admirable leader, but had to put it down almost immediately because he couldn't see the words clearly. His eyes were heavy and begging to be closed. He turned off his reading lamp, and settled into his pillow. Just when he was about to sink into sleep, he felt the creeping assault with which he was so painfully familiar. His system was about to be inverted, and night would be turned back into day, even though he was exhausted. His legs began to twitch, his back felt like it was loaded with a spring coiled and ready to explode. He turned from one side to the next, tried lying on his stomach and then his back. When this failed, he tried something he had read about in the newspaper: progressive relaxation, in which the insomniac focuses on tense muscles and relaxes them one by one. The problem was that by this time all of his muscles were tense, and nothing could avert the flood of energy about to pour over him. His heart was pounding loud and fast, and so when he felt the burning sensation of what pretended to be hunger in his belly he knew he was a goner. So Ben Kaplan got out of his bed, went into the kitchen and made himself some toast.

He was staring blankly at the crumbs on his table when he began to see faces taking shape. First it was Abe, followed in turn by Michael Degner, Bobby Doyle, and Holly Laurent. He closed his eyes and breathed in deeply, trying to calm himself, but to no avail. Without being aware he was doing so, he moistened the index finger on his right hand by licking it, and then used it to pick up crumbs, which he brought to his mouth. They were too small to have any taste. When the table was picked clean he began staring once again. This time he saw his sons, David and Paul, neither of whose faces he could conjure up with any clarity. In the background was their mother, his ex-wife Miriam, smiling at him fondly. He smiled back at her and thanked her yet again for taking such good care of their boys, a job they both knew he could not do. He stood up and was preparing to return to bed when he decided to take one last look at the table. This time it was Moira Monahan, and she too was smiling fondly at him. But her smile made him uncomfortable and so he left the kitchen abruptly and went into his bedroom. His exhaustion was complete for it now reached from head to toe, inside and out. He sank into his pillow hopeful that whatever force it was within him that was hostile to sleep would soon be overcome by the enormous weight of his fatigue.