

MAGNUS COONEY

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Part I

Magnus Cooney stepped out onto 42nd St and looked around. A warm wind hustled down the sidewalk, trailing smells of burnt coffee and cigar smoke. People hustled by too, those that were out, each one leaning as if going up a slight grade, each carrying something, dragging it almost. Cars sat in the street and honked in the shadow of an iron roadway overhead that disappeared into the building. Cabs sat in a cab line, their drivers looking dour, resigned, waiting for fares. One peeked beneath his visor at Cooney, who looked away. No one seemed to have any mind other than to walk. Or DON'T WALK. Still, the whole scene pulsed with the rhythm of a single, live system. Something doing its business without thinking. Just like Magnus Cooney.

Cooney was fifty years old and Caucasian—what a peculiar term. Was he really from Caucasus? Not a handsome man—weak-chinned, pasty, short and portly, still his green eyes gleamed unusually from beneath dark, bushy brows.

Cooney didn't have a family. His one marriage—to a drifter, more or less, who'd come through his small town years before—ended quickly and without incident when she got some job offer in Tulsa and left. Magnus, having sold his snowmobile and lost his Hyundai to repossession, now owned nothing—no land, no home, no vehicle. Not even a screwdriver. He'd come to New York City to start over.

Cooney could have stayed right there in Pershing Square, upright in the breeze, the grit beneath his shoe leather affixing him to the sidewalk, the bluish pavement pied by dark gray gumsplats. It felt fine. He'd traveled all night by train and all the day before to bring himself here to where he was. He could be finished. Perhaps he'd arrived. He looked down at his shoes, his triple-knotted laces. There was a stained index card down there on the sidewalk with math calculations rapidly scribbled and some phone numbers. And a woman's name—Ginny. But he thought better of it.

Magnus Cooney's legs felt heavy as he made his way west. He had a heavy body. He'd always thought he had a prize-fighter's name. Irony. He strode. His joints jangled—which is saying something for a guy swathed in flesh and fat. Each step featured a little thrust, as if he were kicking out the kinks, which he was after 18 hours on a train. His shadow—the

early morning sun ran up 42nd St.—met the figure of a lone man walking east who knifed through his shade. Cooney wondered for a moment what degree of cooling, if any, his presence—his shadow—had conferred to the stranger’s face. A millionth of a degree at least, surely.

Across the street was a clock. It read... quarter to H. The words “NAT SHERMAN” circled the dial—a tobacconist’s shop. He wished he smoked at times like this, being somewhere new, where newness was enough of an occasion to be extended in the way only smoking can. It was a new day, a new city. A new man. Magnus Cooney wanted to feel his newness before everything got old again. A cigarette would help.

Nat Sherman’s wasn’t open yet. Across the intersection, at the corner of 42nd and Fifth, sat a ramshackle hut nearly barricaded by newsprint. Two new bales were just being tossed down from a truck at the curb, and the small Indian proprietor moved swiftly and silently to unlash the bundles and find a stack for them. Cooney paused to watch the little man efficiently square and jog the papers, his bare arms like brown bands of rubber flexing. Cooney actually shook his head to shake away what might be a homoerotic thought—small dark children naked in a stream, the waters lapping at their privates. “Something wrong, boss? I will be with you in one minute,” said the news seller in clipped English. Floating like lotus flowers. Ganges.

“Some gum,” said Cooney, who was forced to chose among a vast selection. Juicy Fruit.

Fuck it, why not. The unlit Marlboro tasted cardboardy in his mouth. Pushing his pursed lips forward and around the filter, Cooney felt like a communicant. Indeed, the filter was dry as the Eucharist. He had to hold his pose, the sun warming his face, as he struggled to light the matches given to him by the news seller. One after another flared only to go out. When the cigarette tip finally caught, the jolt of hot cindery smoke went molten in his lungs and Cooney violently coughed. And coughed so, he couldn’t stop. He sought shade in staggering fashion beneath the sweeping buttresses of the Grace Building yards away.

Across the street, Bryant Park. Named after whom, he wondered. He’d come to the city many years ago, to do a little editing, back when he had prospects. Cooney had answered an ad in the *New York Times*, which he’d driven to Albany to buy. The ad called for copy editors for a biography series. He had to meet with the general editor, a famous academic—who didn’t show. Cooney was handed a manila envelope with a manuscript on the life of someone he’d never heard of and could not now remember—

the book never came out. But Cooney did walk around Bryant Park that day, killing time until his train. He saw Hispanic and black men selling drugs, whispering coded entreaties to passers-by just as they'd passed.

The park looked different today, all spruced up, dominated by a long white tent like for a county fair. He saw a man walk down the length of the park with a falcon on his gauntleted wrist. Black and Hispanic men this day were in uniform wielding brooms and hoses.

The park was in the deep cold shade of the New York Public Library. Cooney sat on a metal stool beneath a tree and leaned forward. Damp soaked into his trousers. His elbows were on his knees and he rubbed his hands together while looking at them, as if expecting to make smoke. Except he wasn't looking at his hands.

He wasn't thinking either. It was much too early for that. Cooney was just feeling—his chilling buttocks, the coarse frictive heat of his hands. He felt some kind of kinship with the small stitch of his pants cuff. He regarded the yellow clocks on his Burberry socks, and noted how they might have been well chosen for his outfit—gray trousers, maize button-down shirt, light burgundy windbreaker with a racing stripe—mauve? —going down one sleeve.

Between his feet a small hillock of sand sat at the intersection of four paving stones. Its circular shape and granular texture against the rough grey stones made it seem to Cooney's eyes a tender encampment in a harsh world.

Cooney couldn't think of what he wanted to do. At that moment, it became important to watch the ants at the ant hill. He felt warmer, and sat there for a good hour.

Maybe he slept, maybe he didn't. Whether he dreamed or just day-dreamed no one could ever say. Nonetheless, he found himself time-traveled to the banks of the river near the house he grew up in. His feet were in the water, burrowed into the cold, slow pudding of the river bottom.

He was eight years old. He was tired from swimming all day beneath the bridge. Now the sun had set and the water was getting warmer as the air cooled. All the kids and families had long ago gone home for backyard hose showers and supper. But Magnus's father was here now, home from work at the mill and standing thigh deep in the river in his ink-blue trunks working himself over with a bar of soap. A sudsy circle swirled around him. He shampooed his balding head with the soap. He turned to Magnus and said, "Watch this." And then he dove under. Magnus meant to stand up to get ready to leave but his feet were socked in the mud. He couldn't move either foot. And his father never surfaced.

It was now an army of ants—five or six dozen, anyway—that worked on the piece of rye bread Cooney had found in his pocket, the remains of last night’s Amtrak dinner. At first, the piece was cautiously probed by two ants. Shortly, it was swarmed over and large pieces were hewn off. The pieces became smaller pieces, and so on, until the half slice of rye had been pulverized to the degree at which one ant could carry one morsel to the hole. It took about 15 minutes for the entire piece to go from paving stone to somewhere beneath paving stone. Then all the ants furiously scoured the area as if in search of yet more pieces of rye bread, convinced, it seemed, that they’d turn one up. Cooney got up and left.

He found himself talking to the news seller, whose name was Massoud—he introduced himself as if it was a courtesy expected of him. It was quarter to eight, and Massoud was getting busy. People were emerging from underground in strings; lines of workers crossed at the light and stopped by for newspapers and cigarettes and gum and lottery tickets. But Massoud was happy to talk to the stranger in the windbreaker smoking a Marlboro. Massoud wasn’t Indian, but Pakistani. “East Pakistani,” he said, “after the Partition, the year I was born. But now, Bengali, since independence. That was 1971. Where were you?” Magnus was left thinking: high school, the prom, gym class. “Nowhere,” he said.

During a lull in business, Massoud emerged from his side door and had a Marlboro himself as he tended to the resettling of his newspapers, his head held at an angle and one eye shut to avoid the curl of smoke rising from his cigarette. “Actually, I am Bengali ancestry. Such a long story! Where you from, mister, may I ask?” Cooney told him his brief bio but generalized for the foreigner. “American, then. Upstate, eh? Cold winters I would not like, mister.” They talked for 15 minutes about the weather, in between Massoud serving his customers. The lottery tickets took an inordinate amount of time. They concluded that today was a beautiful day, and the week was going to get warmer and warmer, into the 90s by Wednesday. “I very much like the hot,” said Massoud. Cooney said he didn’t care. He took off his windbreaker by way of demonstrating his adaptability and then put it back on. A policeman with a big gut appeared with another one, a slender woman, behind him. The gut—his name tag said Sullivan—asked Cooney a question, or at least Cooney thought he did. Later, he couldn’t remember what prompted him to say he was early for an appointment. He produced his wallet and gave Massoud five dollars for newspapers. He took 10 copies of the *Daily News*. Massoud looked concerned, but took the money. Cooney walked down the street and ducked underground into the subway. The female cop

watched him go.

It was two quarters in the slot last time Cooney was through here, but now there was clearly a more elaborate process. You'd think he was going to King's Cross. Cooney'd been to London once, back when his hair was long and he wore paisley patches on the hems of his jeans. So he did some reading of the placards by the toll booth and forked over eight singles at the window for a yellow card with credit for four rides on it. As he bellied through the turnstile with the sheaf of newspapers under his arm, Cooney realized he'd been overcharged for something by his Indian friend and backed up. But he was already through to the other side. He appealed to the booth attendant, who would not look at him. "I'll be right back?" said Cooney, plaintively. "I left some money up with the news guy. On the corner." The clerk shook his head. Cooney inspected his wallet. He'd left Barton with exactly five hundred dollars, the limit on the five automated teller machines in town. Let's see. It was too dark to see. Knock-knock-knockin'. "Sir, please let me get to the street for a second. Sir?"

The attendant waived him through the turnstile, and Cooney went, rolling his hips through like a tourist. He said thank you and went up the subway stairs and there, in the sunlight, before turning the corner to Massoud's, he did his recount.

He had all his receipts: for the two sandwiches and two coffees on the train (\$7.92 each), for the *Newsweek* he bought in White River Junction (\$3.95). For the train ticket, Barton to Montreal and Montreal to New York—\$208.00. That would leave him with \$272.21 before he got to the news kiosk—18 twenties plus \$12.21 in lesser denominations. But he didn't have \$272.21 and he didn't have 18 twenties, he had 17 twenties plus \$10.96, for a total of \$250.96, which means he spent \$21.25 since getting to Massoud's. Minus the eight dollars for the subway card means he spent \$13.25 at Massoud's. He remembered distinctly giving a five-dollar bill for the 10 newspapers, even though he was nervous at the policeman's attention. That would mean he spent \$8.25 for the Marlboro cigarettes and the pack of gum. Wrong! He went up to see Massoud and explain the problem.

The police were still here, but Cooney, sure that a mistake had been made, pressed his case. Yes, the gum was a quarter. But then eight dollars surely was an overcharge for cigarettes? Though he had not smoked in a quarter century, he knew from the sign above the Qwik-Mart on his way to work that cigarettes were about four dollars a pack.

"I'm sorry. Massoud: you charged me eight dollars for the pack of cigarettes."

"That's the going rate," the female cop said, walking up next to

Cooney and looking down at his wallet and bumping him with her hip. “This is New York. Where are you from?” He looked at Massoud, who cocked his head an eighth of a turn, and said, “New England state, Lisa.”

Cooney, if nothing else, knew very well when to get out of Dodge. When constables and the like are correcting your view of things, best to saddlebag your view of things and mosey. He retired his argument into his billfold and walked backward. He put a look of “what was I thinking?” on his face and darted his eyes around, as if there were an answer up over the traffic light. Then he repaired to the dark cool of the subway staircase.

“I’m back,” he said to the subway attendant, who shrugged and then decided to feign some glee. Okay, thought Cooney, as the turnstile bucked against him. I get it. He managed another swipe of his card and was once again officially in the hands of the New York City Transit Authority. An old black man in sharp corduroys and a turtleneck began to play “When the Saints Come Marching In” on a dented trumpet. Magnus enjoyed the evocation of a ragtag, rhythmic march down an avenue. “I want to be in that number...” he thought of saying to the horn player, but didn’t.

Cooney settled in with his newspapers. He was glad he chose the *Daily News*. He was thinking now, and he was thinking how he wanted to see New York City as it saw itself as a town. He knew enough about the *New York Times* to know that its purview was the world, it spoke as if to the world, a small part of it, but the world nonetheless. He grew up reading the *News*. His parents got it every Sunday, and most weekdays, too. And in it was the city itself—gritty, grimy, ink-stained, over-inked for good measure, full of photos and saucy captions. He loved its sloppiness, but it was a sophisticated slop, not the spiritless drool of a local paper in his town (or the nearby town, actually)—“Wednesdays Have Variety of Tastes,” giving the church supper menus—but the overblown, overreaching kind of sloppiness of people out to entertain—the famous “Ford to City” one. Today’s headline was big and uncomplicated—the death of a former president.

He read the thing in 15 minutes, but of course he missed things. He would read another copy, looking for what he missed, but his rear-end was sore. The oak benches on the platform were unforgiving. And then he noticed the sound. The deafening sound that he somehow had blocked out, of trains coming and going, screeching and bellowing. Electronic beeps mixed with computer voices and the occasional human squawk over the sound-system. As he got up to get his circulation going he noticed a heated argument taking place behind him, two deaf people in extreme disagreement, signing with bodily force and grunts and heavy

breathing, their faces contorted by the emotions no part of their face could really help them articulate; it was in their hands, which flew like daggers in a knife-throwing act, whizzing violent notions past the deaf ears of each down the lonely stretches of the train tunnel.

At least they didn't have to listen to the trains. Or to each other. But they missed the trumpet guy, who was eyeing them, and pumping out, "You Always Hurt the One You Love."

There were too many people on the platform all of a sudden. Edge-to-edge people, none of them talking. More people by number than perhaps lived in all of Barton swept up and down, walking faster than Didier Foke the mad farmer, who went at least as fast as tractor traffic on the road into town to get his Red Man and his mail. People on the move. The turnstiles chunk-chunk-chunked. Cooney decided he had to move too, but getting on a subway train wasn't something he knew much about—where would it go, what was there? So back out of the station he went.

He avoided Massoud's corner and walked west down the length of Bryant Park again, like the falconer had a few hours before. It was now a little after 10 by Cooney's watch. His cell phone rang. He let it ring. He knew who it would be—the radio station, where he had worked for some 20 years. They were probably missing him by now. No one to write the Chittenden Bank copy; no one to write the Agricultural Extension lead-in; no one to draft the Morning Farm Report that then Chet Bosworth would butcher in the name of creativity. No one to write up the birthday announcements for The Happy Whistler.

He read in the paper that Katharine Hepburn's estate was having an auction later in the week. Only in New York! He bet that he could actually attend, if he lived that long. Her address books, with names like Olivier and Howard Hughes and Spencer Tracy scribbled in; her favorite chair; dozens of self-portraits in oil with exaggerated features, including "storms of freckles." He loved that. And many, many rotary phones. Hepburn hated touch-tone phones. Who could blame her? Hepburn could dial a phone with style, her long-sleeved arm and bone-elegant hands executing precise circles in the air. He remembered watching Hepburn movies with his mother, mother and son in a quiet country living room, Kate Hepburn flowing from room to room in some mansion, answering phones. Cooney bent down and let slip his cell phone into a sewer grate.

"What are you doing there, sir?" It was the female cop. Cooney stood up. "I dropped my phone," he said. Her name was Fincher. Lisa Fincher. "I dropped my cell phone. By accident." Officer Fincher said it looked

like he threw it away. “No, no. I was bending down to get better reception. Now what’ll I do?” Officer Fincher gave him a look. “Use a pay phone,” she said, moving on. But then she turned back. She walked back toward him with her head down, as if pondering a coming remark. “Sir, I don’t want to see you around here when I come back through here. Understand?”

Cooney said he did but he didn’t. He then thought of better replies. “Yea, I think I can figure that out, officer.” Or, “No, please repeat yourself. And show your work!” Or “Yea, speaking English, I understand. Knowing the law, I will disregard.”

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His mother was a strange woman. Her name was—he couldn’t remember at the moment. She was addicted to television. When she did the dishes, she would do them one by one, wash one, dry one. She’d wash a plate at the sink and then take it to the couch with a dish towel and dry it while seated on the edge of the sofa, watching TV. She would mix batter there, whisk eggs, sew, polish shoes. Magnus really hated this other presence in the home, this endless line of visitors named Bob Barker and Mike Douglas and Mike Carr, who was a detective on a soap opera and, he suspected, a fantasy lover of his Mom’s. Magnus spent many of his afternoons as a child sitting in a closet where a skeleton hung. Sometimes, the skeleton would start to clatter, wanting to get out, and he would run out and take a pot or a spoon from his mother and threaten the skeleton.

That was after his father died. That wasn’t on TV.

Cooney nodded to Officer Fincher. He thought he’d moved on. But here she was. He checked his watch, as if he had a schedule. He looked around, as if to get his bearings, and made purposeful steps westward down 42nd Street. “Dammit, I’m late,” he said for the officer’s benefit. He dumped his newspapers in a trash basket.

He felt clear of her presence after a block. He was sweating. He checked his watch again, this time actually reading the time: it was 10:15. The sun was hot on the back of his windbreaker and he took it off. He felt the breeze cool his spine. Cooney walked down into the Times Square part of 42nd Street. It wasn’t what he recalled. No marquees, for one thing. No preachers on the corners pitching salvation. No one selling the opposite. Just sports shops, steak houses, and a Madame Tussaud’s wax museum, where Ronald Reagan stood in a blue suit, smiling, posing for pictures. Cooney wanted off the street.

Up Eighth Avenue he spotted a touch of the old iniquity—a place that promised nudes and novelties and books and XXX films. Show World. He ducked in. The place was harshly lit and the air was sharp with antiseptic. He liked the music, though. Blues, Jimmy Reed but maybe Clapton playing. He walked past shelving full of pornographic tapes showing all manner of bestial human coupling, men with penises like lengths of blood sausage and women burdened with the breasts like prize produce. Some of the women were sucking animal parts. In the back was a row of stalls, each with a door slightly ajar. He entered one and closed the door. A light came on. There was a small screen inset in one wall and a tiny bench on the wall opposite. The instructions said to insert a quarter into a slot, which he did. A touch screen allowed a scan of films to watch. He pushed the one where a man in a policeman's cap was being sucked by two women, one white, one black. On the screen came, as promised, a man in uniform who remained silent while the two women in what looked like a holding cell chatted scratchily as they undressed him, removing his gun belt and his uniform shirt and his bullet-proof vest, and then they pulled out his cock, which was a huge, red, veined thing, half-hard. Both of them in turn worked him over, raised him up. Then he had to put another quarter in for the scene to continue, did Cooney. They got his trousers off after some difficulty with the laces of his shoes. He had white socks on. Then one of the girls, the black one, lifted her skirt up and turned around and the officer went in and out of her from behind while she sucked at the other girl's nipples. This went on for a minute or two with a lot of moaning and yelping and then the officer pulled out and the girl he had been in turned around and sucked him. Then another quarter was required, Cooney's last, and he shakily put it in the slot in order to see what he saw, which was rather predictable and thrilling and then it was all over. On the screen came a message not to smoke, followed by "God Bless America." Cooney sat there with a terrible ache in his groin. He removed his handkerchief from his pocket and did what he hadn't done in years, to relieve himself. He found himself crying but he made an involuntary noise of joy at the end.

Cooney felt there was a sense to things now. He walked along the street feeling whole. The street made sense, the city made sense, the Appalachian trail made sense and the whole American way of life made sense as a place in which something like Magnus Cooney was not absurd. He could see where he was from a place on high, beyond the world, spiraled way upwards, god's view, or Hitchcock's. But he didn't look down pitilessly on himself or the hot dog vendor or back there at Massoud ply-

ing his wares, or at Officer Fincher now nudging along a man on a sidewalk grate, or at the pigeons atop an old hotel sign, even as one of them tipped forward like a quart of beer about to spill from the top only to express gray shit from beneath its feathers. No, he looked on them all with love. The home-fires-burning smell from the vendor's brazier, Massoud's gentle being, the female cop's earnest aspiration to be a force for good despite wearing undergarments with pale pink kittens along the waistband; and the pigeons: how stupid they were, how innocent! These reveries brought Cooney all the way around to the other side of Bryant Park, heading toward Fifth Avenue with the massive New York Public on his left. All of a sudden, a chill took him and he sniffled. And sneezed. He then yawned. He lit a Marlboro. He was anxious again.

On the other side of the street, in the middle of the intersection, with all traffic stopped, was a mounted policeman. How quaint! How 19th-century! But the clip-clop of the horseshoes turned ominous, all traffic sounds stopped. Cooney could hear himself tinkling his own pocket change. And he stopped. The horse shied and got unruly. It bucked and meandered. Cooney saw that the officer, in a helmet, was straining to rein the horse in. Horse and rider turned down 40th Street, toward Cooney. He ducked away behind a wall of the park when he recognized Officer Fincher, in disguise, with a false mustache and dark sunglasses, atop the horse. She couldn't hide her breasts. Cooney crouched down, mortified that his cigarette was sending up a straight spume of gray smoke but too scared to alert anyone by disrupting it. He stayed there till the clip-clops faded away.

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Cooney walked around. Past the New York Times building, with what he imagined were brilliant, young reporters—from Princeton, from Harvard—standing outside smoking. He treated himself to another Marlboro. Somewhere toward the end of this long building, in front of large truck bays, there was a little child, a girl, seated in a small chair, crying. Cooney stopped and bent down to her. "What's the matter, dear?" He almost offered his handkerchief. "Why the sad face?"

"My horse lost." Cooney straightened up. He hadn't taken her for a horse player. "You have a horse?"

"No, silly," she said, brightening. Cooney recognized her gap-toothed grin. It was Rudy from the Cosby show. "Smarty Jones. He lost."

"I don't know who that is, honey. You mean he lost a race?"

"That's right, mister. The Belmont. I loved that horse. He had a bad

eye, like my brother. And he lost the race.”

Cooney was overmatched. “By a head,” she added with an adorable pout.

“I sent Smarty a letter telling him not to worry, it’s okay. He’s a good horse.”

Cooney laughed. “Honey, you think the horse’ll read your letter, do you?”

“No, silly.” She stood and brushed crumbs off her white dress. She was holding a little stuffed horse, and she petted it. “Smarty can’t *read!*”

For a moment, Cooney felt awful at wrenching this admission from a little girl.

“Someone’ll have to read it to him, is all” she added, nodding to her stuffed animal.

Cooney felt nearly evil to be holding a lit cigarette all this time. “Bye, little girl,” he somewhat splurged. “I’ll say a prayer for Smarty. Next time he runs.”

“No you won’t,” she said.

Cooney felt thirsty. His mouth had dried from his encounter with his own sexual arousal, and now, with his love for this little girl, his tongue pulled from his teeth as from dry ice. And right there, just past the corner, a bar that looked open. It was. O New York!

Of course, it was morning in the bar. TV news on, the place shiny and clean, two guys on barstools reading the papers. A barkeep in an apron stocking his shelves. The cool gloom.

“What can I get you?”

Cooney didn’t drink much. It suddenly shamed him. He had the image of himself as an aging wheel of cheese, maturing, drying, untouched.

“Canadian Club and soda,” he said. He put one of his 17 twenties on the bar.

The drink was gone in one long gulp, it tasted so good, so clean and cleansing. Everything snapped brightly on his palate and his sinuses cleared. The room brightened for the water it brought to his eyes. And there was the barkeep with the bottle held high in his right hand and the seltzer gun in his left.

“Another?”

“I think I will.”

From the twenty dollar bill he got nine dollars in change. Cooney now had \$241.21.

He lit up a Marlboro as he did his math in his head only to be offered an ashtray by the barkeep, who said, “Can’t smoke in here, fella. Where you from?”

Cooney thought it was a joke at first, but then felt the guy's steady mean-business gaze, and he stubbed it out. "Sorry."

"Stupid fuckin' law. No, I'm sorry. Sorry for Bloomberg's ass next time he runs. If he's so concerned about my health why doesn't he make sure I get insurance? He's on some kinda pilgrimage, I tell ya."

"I hate guys on a pilgrimage," said Cooney.

"Tell me about it," said the barkeep, nodding toward the television.

A half hour later Cooney was still there, nursing his third CC & soda. They'd talked about the orange alert, the death of Reagan, the upcoming convention and the Mets and Yankees. The conversation had petered out when Wheel of Fortune came on. Magnus was then left to his own thoughts. As alcohol often did, it prompted a Magnus recounting of his entire life in the span of one drink. Found, fetched, departed, endured, sent on his way. To employment. He then took stock of more events. It started with The Happy Whistler complaining about the birthday copy too early in the morning. No, it started the next day, the day of the storm. Ted's vehicle off the road where Route 9 had given way. Him standing there. The steam hissing from the overturned chassis ticking right next to him and all four tires whirring, then the way it just slid away from him as he thought to touch it, down the embankment, he chased after it. The violent crunch and snap of trees and the happy sound of the cab filling with water. Then the creaking and then the disappearance. Sadie's face.

He looked outside and ciphered out the bar name in its backward script, and it wasn't easy. SyssenhguahsO. O'Shaughnessys. Then he leapt to the train station at Barton. The dim kid there speaking only French, worrying over his papers for the inevitable customs prowl at the border. Cooney with nothing to read but an old *Montreal Gazette*. The poor Expos. Then the lovely layover at the Montreal station; a chat with an old Jewish man bringing a huge bag of rye loaves down to Plattsburgh. He's just heard Plattsburgh immortalized, so to speak, in the Duddy Kravitz movie he'd watched on late night TV just a few nights before. The Randy Quaid character was from Plattsburgh. "I st-st-st stutter," he said. Then the half-napping down the shore of Lake Champlain, a sandwich somewhere along the way. The wrong connection, thanks to a tie-stained station master in Albany, taking him all the way to Rochester before Cooney realized Buffalo was next. The ill-tempered custody of Amtrak security before being put on an eastbound train back to Albany. The argument with the author Whitley Strieber, who was going to Boston and who—surprise—wouldn't talk about his alien abduction, his "communion." Cooney had read the book, and thought the guy was a fraud but never got to say so. Strieber denied being Strieber, so Cooney borrowed some

ID off of a fellow passenger to show Strieber he wasn't Cooney, but Strieber wouldn't even look at the driver's license. Eventually, New York. So he'd made a few mistakes.

It was smart to get out of the bar. Cooney felt a little disgust at himself. The air was getting thick with truck sounds and car alarms and fire trucks honking and barreling up an avenue somewhere near. This was not Cooney. He couldn't quite think what he was thinking. This was another him. But perhaps that's what this journey was all about. Why the hell was he here, anyway? His head was starting to ache, his mouth was dry again and he was hungry. He wished he were home but when he thought about home he thought of a tall granite slab in a cool forest, he didn't think of his foldout couch or his wall-to-wall carpeted apartment above the barbershop or his cheap sound system or the TV he'd stopped watching or his dust-laden bookshelves with story after story all too neatly engineered. Well, yes, he did think of these things, but wished them away before the screen door to the back stairs opened and Opie came in, his hayseed neighbor with the big laugh. Or his "brother" Ted. Worse yet, Sadie, with her auburn locks and her sweet breath, like vanilla. He loved the word "vanilla." It almost dripped down your chin. So he slammed the door on all that and laid himself out on the granite slab down near the falls, an ice cold rock, as wide and long as a door but as deep as a house. He imagined Indian dead offered up on this high bier to the buzzards and the crows. He wanted up there right now.

He opened his eyes. Down the street, the little girl's chair was empty. The sun was glaring. It must be near noon. He wanted to see the friendly face of Massoud.

"Hi you are back, boss." Cooney had retraced the little midtown quadrant he could now call his own and found his news seller at his post near the library. "It is noon, boss. Where are you from? You are not looking well."

Cooney didn't want to speak. "I need to eat."

Massoud was not alone in the booth. "I will leave with you to the park. I will give you some curry. My wife will take care of the customers. Lunch break, boss!"

Together—the small Pakistani man in cloth slippers, white cotton trousers and a sleeveless cotton smock, and Cooney in his Sears The Men's Store garb—they walked along the wide walk and into Bryant Park. There they sat on bare chairs around a small green metal table. Massoud pulled from a cloth sack two Tupperware containers, napkins. From his pants pocket he produced a bag of plastic forks. He had cold tea in a flask. They began to eat the warmish curry, hotly spiced.

“Chicken, Mr. Cooney. First, have a date,” which he produced from a folded napkin.

Cooney was too tired to talk, but the food fortified him as Massoud told him about his life back home.

“I come from Kerala, originally. In India, not in Pakistan. There was no Pakistan. But when partition gave us a homeland, went to the West, to the new Pakistan. But then the Hindus drive us out. They only kill two million. We go to the East, to the other Pakistan. Driven by Pakistanis too! India fought for us, to kill us, but in the end, we are free. We are good people, Mr. Cooney. Islam is not what these other people are about. They are criminals. Where are you from?” Cooney was chewing. He didn’t know anything about himself.

“In Kerala, there are many communists. I am a communist. I believe not that everything must be shared but that nothing should be stolen. And if it is stolen it must be stolen back. And distributed. I am also a Muslim, yes, but that is not a problem for me. It is consistent, Mr. Cooney. The only thing not consistent is that I am a Yankee fan. Ha Ha. Like who said, like rooting for Ford Motor Company!”

Cooney felt as if hot coals were being pressed to his cheeks. The curry was blazing.

The distressed Cooney was offered a drink from the flask and took it. He then excused himself to buy a can of seltzer from a vendor on the sidewalk. One dollar.

“I don’t know, Massoud. I’m just a Roman Catholic from the backwoods. I don’t believe in equality and who the hell is out there doing good? And I hate the Yankees and everything about boxing.”

“Mr. Cooney, you can afford the luxury of not giving a shit, then? I guess...?”

“I guess so.”

“Two million people, Mr. Cooney. Many millions dead over whose God is whose, eh, Boss? One year after 9/11, right here in the park, they set up empty chairs. I remember this number: 2819 empty chairs. All the dead of 9/11. American dead. War for that? Why not talk, eh, Boss? Figure out the problem. The grievance, as the union guy says. No. Bombs. Bhopal was 10,000 dead in a day. They talked. Money. Not enough, but money. Better than bombs, Mr. Cooney.”

Pigeons surrounded them on the ground, a dozen or more, clucking and strutting, approaching them at oblique angles, looking for crumbs, and then moving away, as if not really interested.

“My wife and I live in Brooklyn. We live very spare. We are poor, Mr. Cooney, but happy. We have two kids. Although things are not so good since nine eleven. They watch us. But there is no problem. You should come visit while you are in town.”

Cooney had eaten his portion and he tried not to eye what Massoud had not yet eaten. The pigeons below them shifted a bit toward Massoud's side of the table.

"Where were you during nine eleven?" asked Massoud.

"I don't know," said Cooney. "Let me think." Cooney knew he heard about it at lunch, in Meg's diner, over his tuna melt. That Tuesday. But at 8:30 in the morning, or whatever it was, he supposed he was driving to work, listening to a Stephen King audio tape. "Thinner." That's what he usually did on the way to work, listen to horror stories.

"That's funny. Really odd. All of New Yorkers know where they were. I could tell you where a thousand of my customers were. I had many people who lost friends there. I had two friends, in the restaurant. They died. I wrote their names down, and the names of people who had lost people. I don't know why. I thought I would make a book. Actually, I only wrote down their names, till 99 names. There are 99 names for God in the Qur'an, did you know. I say their names are also names of God. The plane that hit Tower One passed right over us at the stand. Right on down Fifth Avenue. I heard it. I knew."

"That was very good tea, Massoud."

"Tamarind, boss. And some ginger. Good for the heart."

Cooney looked above him at the canopy of green leaves. It made him dizzy. He looked down. His fingers were drumming the table. He searched for his pack of cigarettes, the red box, and then lit up a smoke. He felt like an American. How cheaply. Then he watched the smoke as he jetted it from his mouth. It clouded and formed into a ragged line and then shredded into the trees.

"I have left a bad situation, Massoud. Let's leave it at that."

"What did you do? Is there something?"

"I don't know. That's why I'm here. I don't know what I did. Or what to do."

"So you come to the Big Apple. Do you know why they call it the Big Apple? Do you, Mr. Cooney?"

"It's just a slogan. A tourist board thing."

"No. Now, yes. But it was the horse people. The races in New York were big money. Big apple for the horse to eat!" Massoud thought this was funny.

"It is a lot to eat, Massoud. Too much, you think?"

"No no. Enough for everybody to take a bite. Ha-ha!"

A black man dressed in too big clothes sidled by. "Boogie-woogie," he said loudly, leaning over the table as he passed.

"What'd he say," asked Cooney.

"He said, 'How's Nebraska,'" said Massoud. "Animal." He wiped out the two Tupperware containers. He then closed each lid and then

burped them. He laughed. Cooney burped as well. They both laughed.

Their metal chairs made an awful sound against the stones as they both got up to leave.

“Well, boss. Back to work for Massoud. What is, as they say, on your plate, Mr. Cooney. Cooney at first couldn’t make sense of the question. He checked for his wallet.

“What do you mean?”

“What is next for you? Do you catch a train? Most people catch a train.”

Cooney’s lack of a plan was made plain. “A hotel, I think.”

“Try the Carter, cheapest around here that is not all junkie and whore.”

Cooney said nothing as they made their way back toward the newsstand.

“Across from the New York Times building. Ninety dollars. Clean.”

“Well, thanks.”

“Mr. Cooney, my uncle is working the stand with my wife later today. Do you know why?”

“You are lazy, Massoud?”

“No. I am going to see Ford Motors play ball tonight. It is as close as I get to cricket, boss. You should come with me. You Americans. You can explain the country pastime to me, can you? I have tickets. C’mon.”

Cooney couldn’t find something to say. He backed away.

“Watch yourself, chief.” Officer Fincher. He had bumped into her.

“Lunch break, boss,” Cooney said to her with a sudden nonchalance. And he headed up the library steps, two at a time.

There had been no library where Cooney grew up, only a bookmobile that came through once every two weeks and parked for an hour out in front of the firehouse. The librarian was also the driver, a large balding man who dressed in green work clothes. He sat behind the wheel with a due date stamp. The bookmobile was like a large RV lined with bookshelves; browsing wasn’t really an option. The space was cramped and the light was bad. Still, Cooney as a boy did what little reading he did out of the bookmobile—Arnold Hano’s life of Willie Mays, a teal-colored series of biographies of great Americans—Israel Putnam, Jim Thorpe, Nathan Hale. At home, there wasn’t much to read other than the newspaper and TV Guide—though it was in the TV Guide that he could find someone speaking the truth: a woman named Judith Crist skewering witless comedies like *My Mother the Car*. There was a library in the county seat, but you needed a special pass from the school to get in, and you couldn’t borrow anything.

Of course, Cooney had gotten acquainted with libraries once he got to college. The community college had one—two floors above the old “Olympic-size pool.” But he’d never been in a building like this—a block long, filled with he knew not what.

Revolving doors swung him into a security check, where a line of people speaking what he thought was German preceded him. A man in uniform looked through all their bags. The man waved the accessory-less Cooney through. He said to the man, which way to the books?

With a toss of the head he was directed up a grand staircase. Everything was marble, marble that seemed to be slightly damp, as if from a light secretion. The air was cool. On the wall along the staircase hundreds of names were etched—donors who made the library possible. He scanned the list looking for familiar names. He found Astors and Vanderbilts and Morgans. He didn’t see any Cooneys.

He walked along the hallways on the second floor, off of which broke interesting-looking rooms filled with tiers of wooden card catalogues. One room had a sign above it saying it was the tobacco such and such; another was a something room. At the end of the hall he found “Genealogy.” He walked in.

There was a main desk at which no one sat. Under the sign “information” sat an empty chair. But an officious-looking woman was bustling about on the other side of the countertop. She asked him if she could assist in his research.

“My research?”

“Yes. What are you looking for? I am here to help you.” Her breath was as sour as old vase water. Her accent southern, and Cooney had read enough to have the word “Kafka” rise in his mind and sail off.

“Well,” said Cooney, oddly drawling. “What d’ ya have *in* heah?”

She lowered a brow at him, registered a throat-clearing and then soldiered on. “Well, sir, we have birth records, death records, old phone books, ship logs, ship manifests, family histories, immigration figures, city census reports. That’s a start, isn’t it?” She now no longer seemed officious. She was a bit peppery, in fact, but held her ground there, seeming truly ready to serve. She smiled. “Take your time, sir.” She put a hand on his forearm. “We’re not busy today.”

Cooney wandered around. What *was* he looking for?

He looked at the wide, worn bindings of the birth records. Dark brown leather with the year embossed in gold. Think of the names he could find in here, innocently entered, with no foreknowledge of the great figures they would become. Like who? Lou Gehrig, came to mind. His stepfather always talked about how Lou Gehrig was born in Manhattan and

went to Columbia. Jimmy Cagney. Humphrey Bogart. Billy the Kid. Really William Bonney. With some effort, he could find their names listed in the appropriate volumes. They went back to the 19th century. Of course, he couldn't find himself, though he was born here too. At St. Vincent's. On Armistice Day, as it used to be called. He recently realized how ironic it was that he was born on a day marking a surrender, a taking over. Surrender was the word the Foundling Hospital used to describe what his mother did six weeks after he was born, just before Christmas, 1954. The Cooneys took over and took him away.

He'd never thought much about it. He knew he was adopted before he knew it. Ed and Elizabeth Cooney took the advice of the Sisters at the Foundling and told him the story of his being chosen before he even understood language or story itself. He was chosen, they said, from a room full of beautiful babies. He was the pinkest one, he was the cutest one. He was the Irish one, which apparently pleased Edward Martin Cooney. When his mother told him officially at the age of nine or so, that he was different than little Teddy, who grew in Mommy's belly. It wasn't a shock, though Teddy seemed a little ruffled, like he'd missed out on something. Magnus just went into his room and looked at his baseball cards. He looked for Albie Pearson and stared at his eager face in his cap with the A and the halo on it. Teddy knocked but he wasn't getting in.

Teddy grew up to be smart Alec Ted Cooney, sharp dresser, ace curser and three-sport star, more nimbly following in Magnus's staggered footsteps as town doofus, a pimply, chubby, indifferent student with no girl friend. His new step-father, technically his step-step father, Bill, who came on the scene a few months after Ed drowned, took it as a personal challenge to toughen up the wobbly Magnus. Golf, bowling, archery, slightly feminine sports in the North Country woods, but perhaps worth a try, in Bill's view. When Magnus turned 16, Bill sprung for a three-year-old brown Camaro with a rust problem. "You'll look good in that," said Bill, when he handed him the keys on a rabbit's foot key chain. This raised Magnus's profile in the community considerably, as the thing had a huge engine and was so fast Magnus could barely drive it. Still, it was flashy, and its engine roared hoarsely wherever he went, no matter how meekly he tried to pull into the feed store to get nasturtium bulbs for his mom or slide into the bowling alley parking lot downtown to roll a few practice games. Fortunately, Teddy took the car for a joy ride and ran it into a concrete culvert, tearing out the bottom. Totaled. Bill didn't have the money to replace it, or the heart. He liked Teddy a lot, and somehow, he held it against Magnus that the Camaro had led to Teddy's shame.

Maybe Bill was his real Dad. He'd thought of that for a while, but not for long. They didn't look alike. Magnus didn't look like anybody anywhere around. All his features were round, while his mother was birdlike,

sharp and angular. Ed was biggish, but he had a big hawk nose. So did Teddy. His mother couldn't tell him anything, or much, about the originals. Just that they were "educated." The mother wanted to go back to college, and the father didn't have gainful employment, being a freelancer journalist, so they had to give him up. And weren't she and Ed lucky to find him!

"Are you looking for a particular ye-ah?" asked the librarian.

"Where's 1954?" he asked, seeing it right there, next to 1953.

It was in two volumes.

"If you are looking for a birth entry, and don't have the name, there's something you can do here to help you find the entry. Would you like to know what that thing is?" The room suddenly filled with sounds—coughing of patrons, squeaking of chairs across the floor. Car horns beyond the walls staged some showdown of wills. The fan above him clipped the space into slivers.

"What?" said Cooney. He wanted a cigarette. No, he didn't. "Yes, tell me."

"I assume you are looking for a birth name, correct? When we are talking about an adoption in New York State, then of course the real name is sealed. One wouldn't have that."

"Okay," said Cooney.

"If you have the amended birth certificate issued by the court, there's a number there. It should be five digits, just like a postal code. If you find that number you'll have the entry. There will be a birth name there."

She let him be. Cooney took down the two volumes for 1954 and placed them on a desk. He did have his birth certificate, folded into his wallet. He hadn't looked at it in years, but his mother encouraged him to carry it with him when he went to England, and he had done so since. He took it out. It had a raised seal in it, his date of birth, his name—Magnus Theodore Cooney—and a number: 45277.

He paused for a bit over the two books. He leafed through the pages. Thousands of names in the left margin, followed by borough and birth date and the five-digit number. The proverbial needle. He put the volumes back, and thanked the lady and left the Genealogy room.

Cooney didn't want to see anybody. Here he was, five hours in Manhattan, and he didn't want to see anybody—not Massoud, not the cop, not a little crazy girl who talks to horses. No more the librarian. Tiny little network out of eight million, but worth avoiding. So he raced down the steps of the library, the two big lions framing his descent, and he headed to the right. Downtown, in city parlance, south, down Fifth. But he didn't like the looks of the bus- and cab-filled Avenue sloping

downhill, escarped by scaffolding everywhere, and he turned around. He looked back up Fifth Avenue, saw trees—Central Park? —and headed that way. Yo, Lions. Cooney scooted past Massoud's newsstand though not without hearing a shout. "Five o'clock, Boss. See batting practice! Yankees!"

He wandered up Fifth, past clothing shops and jewelry stores and what looked like a hotel with a semi-circular driveway. There was Saint Patrick's Cathedral. Each address, though encased in similar stone and architecture, in like postures to the avenue, was a purely distinctive world of its own commerce and product. It was what it was selling—whether clothing, jewelry, shelter or religion. As he wove through the sidewalk traffic, Cooney thought of the long solitary walks to his friend Donald's back in Barton, perhaps four miles on Route 3. He could remember in his mind's eye every place along the way—the guardrails where the Caxton Road came in, the brook running under the road to the river; the bus garage for the school to the left, the roadside tavern and the Baker house. The long field before the next house, owned by the Goodspeeds. Then the slight bend in the road as it approached and avoided the river. Potato fields tended by trustees from the prison to the left and an old barn where an escapee once holed up and was found, near frozen to death, happy to be discovered. The little shack set up by the Nappers with the curling tar paper and the old wash tub out back. Then a mile of road till a bend to the right, above which sat the stone house built by the shop teacher (but never finished). Then the Vennes, then Chummy Christian's mobile home set onto a cinderblock foundation. Then Donald's house, with the long driveway and the basketball backboard and hoop above the garage. At any spot along the way, Cooney could look at the swirl of sand and old road salt on the shoulder and tell you where he was—near the Nappers, across from where the river whirlpooled dangerously near the Cringles, or at the end of Donald's driveway. Drop him anywhere in the four-mile stretch blindfolded and let him lay his palm on the pavement and listen and Cooney could say where he was. So little information along the way—scattered homes, no one ever about, empty fields—that it all had meaning. On Fifth Avenue, everything looked the same, despite a wealth of information—continuous structures, rivers of people, a din of traffic noise. It was all meaningless because of its excess, or it all added up to only one meaning, which was what? Fifth Avenue.

The park beckoned him like the woods. Back home, woods were everywhere, dark and deep. Animals in there, springs, lairs, dens, rusted cars, dirty magazines, ancient bottles, abandoned treehouses, deer stands,

spent shells, rotted stumps. Deeper still, the tangle of nature stuck in its evolving, unable to stop. Here, past horse and buggies for hire and clown acts, paved walkways sloped down toward a quagmire of a lake, where swans slowly sailed and posed. Cooney wandered deeper in, past gigantic out-croppings of rock, past swingsets and bathrooms and ball fields. Food vendors everywhere, and the park benches filled with people lunching or chatting or reading. Why wasn't anyone looking for him?

He took a rest on a wide stone staircase overlooking a small lake on which couples maneuvered in row boats. The truck had slid into the water. Hadn't he saved someone? Hadn't he saved her from the rushing flood waters, the entrapment? Hadn't his brother deserved being stove in? What was the fucking problem? Why wasn't anyone looking for him? Everyone left the job to Magnus Cooney, as if he had a clue.

II

Cooney stopped at a kind of impromptu al fresco Internet café—some microchip promotion—set up in front of a bandshell deep in the park. There he found that he was missing, missing in two ways. Missing from the police account of the accident on the Plank Road, and missing from the list of his step-brother's survivors. Two mysteries.

On *The Sentinel's* wobbly and slow-witted Web site, he was able to call up two articles on the accident, and several on the "blow-down." The storm had come across a cooler Canada and over the Great Lakes. It ran into heavily heated air in the northwestern Catskills and turned abruptly north where the elevations were higher and the air drier and chillier. It ripped through the Adirondacks on Tuesday. Magnus had heard it coming, in the early morning, his cereal spoon in the bowl in the sink rattling him awake at dawn. What followed was a high-decibel thunderstorm, the air cracking and ripping, as if large boxes were being torn apart and tumbled about way upstairs. He looked out onto the road; the streetlights were still on, the air looked jaundiced, gray rain backlit by sulfurous lightning flashes. Through the window screens he could smell the iron of the fine mesh and the ozone scents wafting like invisible smoke. The road sat under about four inches of jumping rain and the trees swung and groaned and bent down their crowns as if ducking for cover.

It kept up all day. The radio station lost its tower in mid-morning and they didn't need Magnus Cooney at all. He knew; they called. Cooney watched the local TV station for updates till his power went out. Then he headed over to the café. There was a virtual mudroom set up in the lounge area; and though the lights were gone there, too, they were cook-

ing with gas and the coffee urns were full and hot and Sadie & Co. were pushing all the perishables at great reductions. Why not? He ordered the perch omelet.

According to the online account he read while rollerbladers circled him, the wind had snapped off 100,000 trees and felled them in large swaths through the forests. The thruway was still closed, power had yet to be restored in five thousand homes, the ferry still couldn't run across the roiling lake, and all of Wednesday's church suppers were canceled. And only one fatality was recorded. That would be Teddy.

Magnus hadn't even tried to hitchhike in that rain. That would involve hope. He had no hope. After night fell everything was profoundly wet outside, the rain still falling. Indoors, his milk had gone warm in the fridge, there was no light to read by, no TV. So he went simply for a walk, fuck it.

There was something beautiful and wild about the night. Darkness everywhere, the grass laid out flat, trees still flailing about, listlessly, like weeds in water. He walked down the little main street to its end, where it turned into Route 3, and then looked at the brook roaring like white traffic right over the road. He turned around and took the Plank Road down toward the river. The leaf canopy above him was so soaked that hardly any rain made it through. He sat along a split rail fence for a bit and just felt awful. For a spell, he couldn't catch his breath. The ditch he sat above—his life?—swirled with the disappointment running off him. He felt his life was a complete waste. School, Cub Scouts, one 4-H ribbon, one Honor Roll mention, class secretary once, one bingo jackpot, straight A's at community college, a great run at darts in a London pub, a couple of lousy grocery bag jobs, a little foray into editing (aborted for lack of work), then life as a radio copywriter. Plus one year of fucking Sadie Frenyea. Now nothing. He was standing ankle deep in the ditch water when the car lights swept over him and then right at him through the rain drops. He could hear the engine and the car radio blaring and Magnus dove into the ditch and was nearly buried in mud and shot pebbles as the car flew over him and thudded into the hill behind him like a spray of machine-gun fire. He heard a scream and a horrible grunt at impact. But the car recoiled and kept going, with metal rattling and creaking and things falling off as he raised his head and watched the tail lights move down and across the road to the other side where they dashed through brush and over saplings before roaring back into the road, where the car began a quick fishtail and then up to a roll, the black underside disclosed as the cross of shaft and axle. The vehicle rolled and rolled till a door came off and the screaming stopped and the car found its wheels again and went down the road backwards to where the bridge had been wiped out by the rains. Magnus got up and

ran after the now retreating car. He saw Ted's head dangling out the driver's side window, barely, beneath the mashed-in roof. The car hung over the precipice. The river foamed loudly beyond. Through the windshield he could see Sadie's streaming face. Her eyes rolled. The car dropped away.

The article, written by Bob Mack, who never learned the niceties of journalism and (Magnus confirmed this over coffee once) didn't know the difference between on the record, off the record and background ("No call for it," Mack said in his defense), stated that "Theodore Cooney suffered a fatal blow via an impalement of the neck and was pronounced dead by the Coroner's office." The car was swept away by the floodwaters. 'Saidie [sic] Freynea [sic] was thrown from the vehicle prior to its immersion in the river. She sustained severe head and chest injuries and several broken fingers and was in critical condition.' He also read Ted's tiny obit. "Survived by his mother, Elizabeth." *His* mother is exactly right, thought Magnus.

Such a tender detail—her fingers. Okay, Mack. He had held her hand in both of his for a long few moments. Each was like a badly hammered drumstick, bone ends and splintered sinew and her sweet meat coming off. Sadie was quiet. He'd had to grab her hand to free her from the water-heavy car. His brother's head bobbed in the current. He got Sadie free before the car swirled away. She was wearing the bathing suit he had bought her at Sears for that July Fourth. The firemen's picnic, where he got sick on the clams. Cans of Bud were floating in the back window and a Marlboro pack. He hated his brother. He loved Sadie. Her left temple was smashed in. When Magnus saw the state cruiser crest the hill, he fled.

He fled Central Park, too. He didn't log off, and was pursued by a man in a Samsung apron, but one look from Magnus took the spring out of his step. Magnus headed back south toward the big hotels.

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He could imagine his cell phone ringing on some ledge beneath the grate where he dropped it. Officer Lisa Fincher listening. Maybe commandeering a fireman to remove the grate and then answering the phone. His mother. "Magnus, is that you?" "No, M'am. He had an appointment at a peep-show."

Cooney didn't like to think of the size of his penis, or the size of stupid Ted's or that Ted's was the last one inside of Sadie. When he got to the end of the park, where all the horse-and-carriage were aligned, the

horses with one bucket in front of them and another behind, he dropped into Mickey Mantle's and had a tall glass of Molson's Ale. Here's to you, Mick. And to you, Teddy boy. He felt charged up. He didn't even bother with the math as to how much money he had left. He admired with his palm the blonde ash bar, and got lost for a bit in the memorabilia on the wall—old Yankees, friendly and regular looking fellows—Yogi, Billy Martin, a grinning Ralph Houk with a cigar. A tourist group was thronging the vestibule and Magnus had had enough anyway, just enough to wet the whistle. He left.

Magnus walked briskly over to Fifth Avenue and back downtown. There were a few men in purple vestments outside taking in the air, one of them smoking. He crossed himself and then had a smoke of his own. Why *not* go to a ball game? He was at Massoud's before he knew it. It was near five o'clock, from the Nat Sherman clock.

Massoud was happy to see him. "Boss, yes. Play ball!"

III

It was really just nearing four o'clock. That friggin' Nat Sherman's clock. Did he really want to go to Yankee Stadium? He had been a baseball fan once. It was a bond with his first Dad. When Teddy was small, Ed and Elizabeth were intent on bringing him round to various relatives. Magnus got to come. Two aunts lived in New Jersey, so for several summers the four of them would make a car trip down the Route 9 all way into Manhattan then over the George Washington Bridge to stay with Aunt Lorraine and Uncle Joe or Aunt Louella and Stanley. Then one night they would drive back over the bridge and up into the Bronx to the old Yankee Stadium—but Teddy was too young, so it was just the older men—Ed, the uncles, and Magnus. That's where Magnus first made the connection between cigar smoke and New York. And between baseball and what men did. Swearing, cursing, drinking beer, insulting authority outrageously. "You're a bum!" his father would yell at the top of his lungs in a crowd. But baseball's allure—and the ways of true men—faded. After the days of heroes playing—Mantle and Maris and Whitey Ford—gave way to days of Tom Treshes and Horace Clarkes, Magnus lost interest. After Ed died—for he had loved him—something else died too. And the few times he checked in on television, the ugly double-knit uniforms and the artificial turf turned him off. And Ed was gone, Teddy was older, there were no more trips to the Stadium and his mother grunted under the wide body of the new Dad, who had a bowling bag in the closet. But why not a little baseball tonight. What else had he to do? And Massoud had tickets. Too easy.

But he had an hour to kill. "We leave at five, boss. Go do something.

Take a shower!”

Magnus thought he'd never shower again. That was part of what he had left behind when he left Sadie Frenyea leaning against a tree at the edge of the Plank Road—things as small and pointless as hygiene. Where had it gotten him? So he went back into the library and made his way to the Genealogy room. He nodded to the librarian and took down the 1954 volumes and began in the A-L one, looking for his five-digit number. Impossible. But since the dates of birth were arrayed in their own column, he realized that visually, his birth date—November 11—would stand out, so he scanned that column only. And there, in the Bs, he found a 1111 that had the corresponding certificate number of 45277. And at the far left, the name of the child—Mark Bradley.

He closed the volume immediately. A name. His. At one time. Astounding. His mother had told him she thought the nuns may have given him the name of a saint—so Saint Mark. The gospel according to.... And she had also given him a letter from the New York Foundling, issued years ago to her and Ed, that gave vague background information on his birth parents. And there, they had called his mother “Virginia.” Was she Virginia Bradley? Was his real father's name Bradley? First or last?

He had a thought. He asked the librarian if she had said they had New York City phone books. Yes, going back to 1935. She brought forth a directory for 1954. Why not. And there he found Virginia Bradley. In fact, two Virginia Bradleys. Oddly, each lived on 72nd Street, at two different addresses, one on the west side one on the east side. He wrote down the phone numbers—Lehi 51377 and Trafalgar 34206—and left.

The shadows were lengthening a bit on 42nd Street. In shade Massoud and his hut made a stick and a box. Cooney added his stick to the scene. “Let's go,” said Massoud. “Adjida is here and will close up.” He grabbed a kind of knitted rucksack from within the kiosk and threw it over his shoulder.

They made their way toward Grand Central. “We will take the 4 train, Magnus. Do you pray?”

Magnus thought he said “play.”

“No. Not any more. I used to. I used to love it. For a while, I did it every day in the summer, and read about it all year. But I was young. There are no heroes any more, Massoud. They are all gone. Now, everything is just money.”

“You should not stop, Magnus. You should not leave growing to your youth. You should grow and develop as a man, to the very end.”

“Don't tell me you play!”

“Of course. Every day, boss, five times, on my knees. To Mecca.”

They went through the heavy doors of the station, the doors through

which Magnus had walked earlier this morning. They walked down a long ramp into the center of the station, and turned right. Magnus followed. The large room was filled with people, some standing, others walking fast. They did not talk.

After a long descent underground, they forked their way through the turnstiles, which were doing mad double-time taking and receiving harried commuters, and made it to the platform for their train. It was no time to be taking a train. "Rush hour," said Massoud. Five-fifteen on a Wednesday. They were jammed shoulder blade to clavicle for several stops, till things thinned out at 86th Street. Suddenly, the train car was half-empty but half-full of men and women in Yankee hats and jerseys.

"I thought you said, 'Do you play.' You said 'pray.' "

"I did, Magnus." Massoud's face broke into a handsome symmetry of lines as he laughed. His eyes warmed.

"Praying. I used to, as a child. I used to believe. But then as I got older—"

"Same thing, Magnus. Same answer! That's why we are going to the great Yankee Stadium. You know the great Yogi?"

"Berra? Yes."

"His mother calls it a 'basilica.' "

They sat on the hard slippery grey benches.

Here were New Yorkers. A young couple, both portly, wearing matching Derek Jeter jerseys, both in shorts and sneakers and white socks. An older man, in his 70s, with a weathered Yankee cap shaped to his skull, the arms of the Y in the interlocking N and Y logo curling up. He had a thin cotton collared shirt on, with his glasses case in the pocket and a rolled up New York Post in his fist. There were too young boys with him, Yankee caps on backwards. Two nerdy looking chaps with ear pieces in place to belt-affixed radios sat rapidly tapping their feet. They both wore unstylish glasses and acne etched their faces in similar pink patterns, like they'd been pelted by strawberries. They talked in bursts to one another. Four stockbroker types in chinos and nice shirts with expensive haircuts stood together around a pole. One of them did the loudest talking and the others listened, for the most part, warily. Everyone was white. Till 125th Street, when a large man with a huge gut in a faded Yankee shirt with Fielder on the back came in with what looked like his wife sporting a big woven bag and a casting a close eye on their two young frisky boys with baseball mitts. A man in a yarmulke entered, too, with a prayer shawl and a Yankee yearbook, which he began to read.

Magnus thought: Massoud, you are the token Muslim, at which point he began to sense that one after another—the black man, the older fellow, the black man's wife, and the Jewish man—noticed Massoud. The

subway token?

Massoud, with his sparse goatee, his large black eyes, his long, broad nose, the thick cotton of his smock and leather-thonged shoes with the thick soles, fit the bill as an Arab. But Massoud registered nothing. He resettled his rucksack from one shoulder to the other.

“I know you,” he said to Magnus. “You don’t have to say.”

Magnus gave him a confused look.

“We don’t have to do the details here, Magnus.”

“What are you talking about?” Magnus tried a laugh.

“You are the infidels. I joke!” But Massoud wasn’t laughing.

Magnus wanted to talk about September 11, about the war, about the prison abuse, about Dick Cheney and Halliburton. About the repression of women and hatred. About jihad. No one he knew or had ever met knew anything about these things. Perhaps Massoud did. September 11 had thrown Magnus more than it had the people around him up in Barton. Just as he remembered, as a third-grader, on that Friday afternoon in the busline as school let out, hearing that President Kennedy had been killed and that the vice-president had had a heart attack (that was the rumor), feeling he was the only one who appreciated the deep significance of events, the events in New York and Washington that beautiful late summer morning hit him the same way. He was in awe of something happening that had so much meaning. Unlike everything else in life that stands open to dispute and interpretation, where results are such that there is dispute as to what actually happened, where one camp can contend that little happened while another is forced to argue that much did, where a family or a group or a crowd or a country can be divided between those who contend one thing and those who contend another, there was no arguing with these events. What had happened, in the case of Kennedy, in the case of both Kennedys, and King, and the Challenger, and 9/11, were absolutely whole and complete events. Clean, total, inarguable. He read where a famous composer had called the attack on the World Trade Center a perfect work of art. He’d read that on the news wire at the station. No one there seemed bothered by it. He knew the guy was right. Oswald had done the same. In a world of incompetence and half measures and compromise, these acts were pure creation. Out of nothing something unchangeable had been created. What once was was no longer. What now was had never been and would always be.

“Who’s pitching tonight,” asked the Jewish man.

Together, Massoud and Magnus herded out of the subway car at 161st

Street and onto a crowded elevated platform; step by step like a criminal procession they moved down a staircase to the street. The crowd moved slowly and as one, the pace of advance no one's choice but everyone's. There may have been other exits, staircases or ways to the ballpark, but, as far as Magnus could tell, there was no reason to worry about alternatives. He felt at ease in the press of this crowd; he easily banked on its collective knowledge of what was what. And Massoud was going along, too. Magnus sensed his own head bobbing along on a sea of shoulders; his feet unseeable below him, but shuffling, shuffling. To his left he saw the Jewish man, his head bowed a bit, getting some reading in as he moved. Directly in front of Massoud bobbed the two young yarmulked fellows, chatting away. Massoud wore a slim smile on his face. The slanting sun seemed to light his eyes from below. Magnus thought he looked very kind.

When their feet finally hit the sidewalk there were New York City policemen stationed there, facing the oncoming crowd. Four or five of them. One cop had a black German shepherd at heel.

Magnus wondered about how Massoud felt—knowing that Middle Eastern men such as himself must be at the center of the complex profile these cops were meant to recognize. Or were they looking for rabble-rousers and drunk citizens, or regular Americans who may have been caught on a surveillance camera, out-of-towners wanted for leaving the scene of a fatal accident?

As each pedestrian gathered more space around him in the wider sidewalk that skirted the stadium, Magnus was surprised that Massoud proceeded straight toward the phalanx of policemen and walked through them, adjusting his rucksack and taking two tickets out of his back pocket to hold in his hand. He gave both tickets to Magnus.

"Take these, Boss, and go to seat." Magnus peered at the tickets. "Section 31, right field, boss. Bleacher creature!"

Magnus stopped, or tried to stop, confused, but the crowd behind him pressed on.

"Where are you going?" Magnus asked.

"I must say hello to my cousin, over here. At the bowling alley." He pointed across the street under the elevated train tracks. Indeed, there was a bowling alley wedged in between bars and souvenir stands—Ball Park Lanes. "There is news from home I must share. Just go give them your ticket. Put mine here"—Massoud removed one ticket from Magnus's hand like selecting a card for a card trick—"go through this gate here, Gate 6. Go to section 80 on the ground level. A little office there, for ticket holding. Give them my ticket"—he gave the ticket back to Magnus—"with your name on it."

"What?"

“Long story, boss. But if I must stay with my cousin or he is not there—then I will have to go to him—I may not be able to come. Hardly a chance, Magnus. But you never know. In that event, he will call his son Sammy, also at the bowling alley, to get the ticket—crazy Yankee fan, you will love him. But I will be there. Here take my bag. There is food in it. Eat!”

Magnus processed all this calmly. He understood. It was like still being in the large crowd on the platform. He didn’t have to think, just follow.

“If I don’t come—but I will—you can leave the bag with Sammy. See you soon. Play ball!”

Massoud swerved through the crowd, threaded through car traffic, and was gone.

“C’mon, mister, you goin’ or what?” said a young kid in a “Boston Sucks” T-shirt. Magnus moved on.

“Let me see the bag, sir,” said the security guard while running a wand across Magnus’s torso. Magnus undid the drawstring. The man pawed inside. “This can’t go in,” he said, palming an electric shaver. “Radio’s okay.” Magnus realized with a bit of a fright that he didn’t know what was in the bag. A copy of the Koran, a few handbills for strip clubs. A note with words in some unknown script—Arabic?—curlicues and blotted dots and a word in block English: “Ban Roll-On.” The man’s finger popped open the tupperware container. “Pita pocket, eh, pal? Have a frickin’ hot dog.” He gave back the bag minus the shaver and walked to a table off to the side and handed it to a woman. “This is out,” he said. “The rest’ll have to go in a clear plastic bag,” one of which the woman helpfully held open. The man left him there.

Magnus transferred the Tupperware and the bills and paper to the plastic bag. “What’ll I do with this?” he asked the woman. “My shaver.”

With blessed patience, the woman explained that he couldn’t take the rucksack or the shaver into the stadium, but could check it across the street—at the bowling alley—and then come back through.

Magnus did as was suggested, carrying his plastic bag and the rucksack, into which he put the shaver and the Koran too, and made his way across the street. He thumbed the holy book. It wasn’t in English. It was in curlicues and dots. But he’d recognized “Qur’an” on the cover.

Inside Ball Park Lanes was indeed a bowling alley, 20 lanes. A thriving bar filled with patrons standing with beer bottles in their hands. Ancient baseball photos lined the walls. The bar was worked by old Irish-looking guys, one with a spectacularly flat orange toupee. To the right was the bag check, a desk fronting ranks of crudely made wooden shelves with

backpacks lining them. Five dollars, said the teenager, who took Massoud's bag and placed it on the top shelf, handing Magnus a ticket and taking his five-dollar bill. "Next," he said.

Magnus walked back into the street, under the deafening roar of the elevated tracks. His hand, he thought, might be shaking. He found his Marlboros. "I'm not a smoker," he realized to himself, lighting up and taking a deep drag. He shook off the stomach-sour feel of homesickness. The mountain nights. His cozy office. Instead, he looked around. People were beginning to hop with a quicker step. A man rang a cowbell. Another came up to him with "Jesus the Messiah" on his T-shirt and handed him a little booklet. It was about Babe Ruth. An enormously fat family, all in Yankee jerseys with the name GIAMBI on the back, cleared the walk and forced Magnus into the street, where a squad car lurched to a stop. Officer Fincher was in the passenger side seat. She gave him a look of impatience. He moved along back toward Gate 6.

Under the grandstand people were moving every which way. Concession stands were six deep with customers waiting for beers and hot dogs and soft pretzels. Women and children squatted down and peered inside glass cases holding souvenir key chains, beer mugs, shot glasses, and cheap-looking plaques. A man presided over it all from a raised podium, hawking Yankee yearbooks and scorecards. The men's room was already doing a steady business. Magnus thought about going but moved on.

Magnus flowed to his right and found the ticket transfer office near section 80, as Massoud had said. There was no line. He was given an envelope by a Yankee employee having a conversation with someone behind him. He was given a pen and instructed to put the extra ticket inside and to write the name on the outside. Magnus did so and handed the envelope back. He lingered, expecting something.

"That's it, Mack. The ticket'll be down at the Will Call window. Just about immediately. Hey," he called as Magnus began to move away. "My pen."

Magnus stood in the rather narrow passageway. He stood his ground, had to, near enough to the side wall as to have his unmovingness attract no New York rebukes. He wondered with a stir of emotions rather than considered thoughts, what the hell. What the hell was he doing? How to get off? Where was...? Who was...? Now what? Then what?

Ever since he'd stepped onto the night train to Montreal—what was it now, two days ago?—he'd been in some kind of conveyance. He'd surrendered himself—that word again—to a higher authority. Granted, his submission was to a motley commission of public utilities—Amtrak, the

NYPD, the Metropolitan Transit Authority—but these were vast, impersonal yet generally beneficent operations with complex responsibilities that had accepted Magnus Cooney without much question and moved him along. “Move it along, Cooney!”

Massoud was something else, of course; of another order—a chance street acquaintance turned into a companion and guide. But where the hell was he?

It didn’t matter, really. Magnus felt some warm calm, as if a tropical current had taken him of a sudden in a colder sea. His body began to loosen and pulse, and then he realized he was listening to music—“I can’t stop loving you/I’ve made up my mind.” A Ray Charles tune, played by the organist out over the ball field for the entertainment of the people filing in.

Ray Charles, Ronald Reagan, Tony Randall, all dead in the week. Three great entertainers, thought Magnus, with some satisfaction. But Ray was the only philosopher among them—“Sometimes you have to bring your own light,” said Ray about his heroin use. Magnus had heard him say that years ago on Johnny Carson, sitting on his hands, raising his face upward over a big smile.

“Your own everything if you’re invited to Ed’s,” quipped Carson.

Magnus waded his way across the river of ball fans in the passageway and into the tunnel leading to the seats. Framed in the tunnel’s opening was the filling grandstand opposite and the nearer field, bright billiard table green giving way to the rich brown of the infield, with crisp white stripes and the three white bases marking off the game’s indelible geometry. A batting cage hooded home plate and out of it balls cracked in long slowing arcs into the outfield, one after another, sometimes two in the air at a time, floating, as if happy to be aloft and meaningless. Ball players with or without caps on might or might not run down the long flies and make the catch. As often as not, the balls hit the grass harmlessly and rolled to a stop.

The organist piled into “Hit the Road, Jack,” and the music had a mixture of church organ and village green calliope to it, making a perfect homage to the great bluesman and the easy evening.

Magnus walked toward the outfield seating sections. Massoud had said “right field.” Magnus was on the field level and knew he’d have to go up at some point, but why hurry? Batting practice was still going on. The opposing team was out there now—San Diego. The Padres.

Magnus figured there must be twenty or thirty thousand people at the park already. He figured that, 300 miles away, his brother was being waked—the evening viewing—at Drown’s funeral home. He didn’t mind missing the Order of Elks ceremony, the bowing of the antlers to Brother Theodore Cooney, Fifth Degree. He knew the dress his mother would

have on—the brown sacking that she wore at Ed’s funeral. He imagined his step-father fielding queries about the whereabouts of Magnus. “You know Magnus...” Sadie unconscious still over at Mary Fletcher in Burlington. How had he lost her? He never had her. “Fuck ’em,” he said aloud. “Padres suck,” agreed a fellow fan.

Magnus made his way away from the field and joined the crowds going up the switchback of ramps to the upper deck.

He wandered into section 31, or so he thought. It could be 29 or it could be 33. There were no ushers around—when he’d come to the old Yankee Stadium with his father, you couldn’t get to a seat without an usher arriving in a worn blue uniform and a dustmop-gloved hand. He’d ask for your tickets, then pull down the seat bottom, give it a wipe, and hand you your tickets. Ed would give him a quarter. Now, no one. You were on your own. But Magnus managed successfully enough to find his row K, seat 1, on the aisle. So he sat down. He placed Massoud’s bag on the seat next to him.

The field was almost nourishing to look at. It seemed so healthy, well-kept, clean. It was in fine trim tonight, like the few pinstriped Yankees who now gamboled about on the otherwise empty stretches of grass. They were limbering up in that relaxed, indifferent way of baseball players who, after all, are readying for a game of three or four hours of mostly standing around punctuated by four or five short sprints. He noticed the famous Jeter, who took a long-striding saunter from the foul line to center field where he turned with a hop and then ran medium-hard back from whence he came. And then he did it again, with a little more heart. Then Jeter and another player lay down together on their backs in the grass and extended one leg over the other and held it. And then did the other.

Meanwhile, the organist continued with his Ray Charles tribute, the jaunty “That’s What I Say” segueing into “I’m Busted.” A medley under way, only to quickly die down as the public address announcer in a very deep voice that Magnus found familiar intoned, “Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to Yankee Stadium.”

The crowd began to clap and loudly murmur, but there seemed a second wave of applause that overwhelmed and then lapped the other. Magnus liked to think it was for the organist. He clapped along.

Where was Massoud, he thought, looking around. He saw a thousand unfamiliar faces but not the one he hardly knew. Up along the light towers, a hundred feet above the ground, he could see two armed men silhouetted against the darkening sky.

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“There’s my friend.”

“No Pashtu here, Massoud, please. I should put up a sign. Where?”

“I am sorry, Imam. I forget.”

“ ‘Mr Akhmed,’ please. Where?”

Mr. Akhmed was the Imam—teacher, counselor, guide—in Massoud’s Brooklyn community. He ran the mosque at MacDonald and Church Avenues, ran the Qur’anic school, the afterschool and the summer camp programs for the children of the Bengali Sunnis throughout Borough Park. Mr. Akhmed was admired by all in the community—by the orthodox for his religious knowledge, by the new generation for his understanding of the English language and American ways, and by all for his connections with the immigration authorities. He had a handsome bearing and an air of gentle authority. Younger and older women alike called him, among themselves, Sharif, after the actor Omar Sharif.

During the summer months, Mr. Akhmed, a husband and father of four children, also moonlighted two nights a week behind the counter at Leroy’s Pro Shop at the Ball Park Lanes, across from Yankee Stadium. From the small office within the shop, he and Massoud, who had known each other since Massoud immigrated to the U.S. 10 years before, looked through the two-way mirror. Magnus Cooney was standing in line at the bag check.

“What kind of friend, Massoud?”

“He is a lost one, Mr. Ahkmed. Not from the city.”

“El-amin?”

“Yes, an honest one.”

“But just how lost. You don’t need a desperate person in your life, Massoud, even an honest one.”

“No, no,” said Massoud, trying but failing to move a large crate of pocked bowling balls so that he could get to a small stool to sit down.

“Yes, yes, Massoud. That is exactly what we need. The lost are the only honest ones.”

Mr. Akhmed stepped around his desk, leaned down and yanked the crate of balls with one hand across the floor to a spot under the mirror.

“There. Sit down.”

“I just meant nothing to lose. That kind.”

Mr. Akhmed sat back. On his desk—actually, Leroy’s desk—were stacks of papers that had yellowed, shifted and interleaved into a general paper thatchery, atop which sat two leather-bound volumes, open, which served to keep everything in place.

As the two men talked, they did not watch each other but the glass. Magnus had handed over his five dollars and Massoud’s woven bag. Looking forlorn and rumped, he stared at himself in the mirror on which was stenciled the name of the pro shop. Mr. Akhmed and Massoud

could see Magnus's eyes reading the letters. They saw his eyes focus on the moving background to his own reflection, scanning the space behind him, where people came and went through the door or moved toward the bar area or milled about with a beer in hand, eyes cast upward at a TV in the corner. Then Magnus seized upon his own image and stared at it. He pursed his lips, sucked in his cheeks a bit and ran his hand over his jaw, feeling his two days' growth of beard. He tossed his forelock back and patted it down and then ran his fingers through, comblike. He hitched up his trousers, ran his tongue across the front of his teeth and smiled and said something like "Hey there."

Mr. Akhmed and Massoud looked at each other.

"No," said the Imam. "He can't see us."

"So Massoud. Tell me the news from home," said Mr. Akhmed, pouring hot water from an electric tea kettle into two cups. He turned his head away as his gold-rimmed eye glasses began to steam.

"I have tea bag," said Massoud, pulling one from his shirt pocket.

"Two," he corrected himself, and he dropped one into each cup.

"Thanks to Massoud, the All-Merciful tea merchant. Your brother, I thought, gave up his import business."

"May God help him. Yes. He has given up everything, Imam.

Everything." Massoud shook his bowed head as he jiggled his tea bag up and down.

"He is lost, then?"

"You must know, Imam. He talks to you."

"But once, Massoud. Just after. His love of Fareed was as his love of the Prophet."

"Too brutal. Too brutal. And his kids now, they run the house. Not she that she's gone. Not the Prophet, Imam. And not my brother."

"May God the All-Merciful, the Beneficent, show him the way."

"Praise Allah, Imam. I wish he win the lottery too. He miss by one number last week."

"May God forgive Sayed Bhapur."

"Thank you, Imam."

The two men sipped their tea. Behind Mr. Akhmed was a curling poster of former bowling great Dick Webber rolling a Brunswick ball down a gleaming lane. Beyond the office was the sound of real bowling going on, the thud and rolling thunder of the balls going down the hardwood and exploding into the hollow concussion of scattering pins, serial but random, like artillery fire. Behind it all was the steadier and slightly ris-

ing din from the bar and the pre-game crowd. A “Let’s-Go-Yan-Kees” chant thudded by on the streets.

“Imam. Mr. Akhmed—but there are no customers, Imam. Why?”
“You never know these days, Massoud. But it does not matter, you are right.”

“Imam, you know I have no news from home.”

“Yes, I know.”

They drained their tea.

“Massoud, play ball! Game time.”

“You know I don’t know this game, Imam. But what you tell me. Yogi, Imam.”

“Massoud. You must learn,” said Mr. Akhmed, rising and laughing.
“New Yankees against old Yankees tonight. Vasquez Javier against David Wells. You don’t understand, but you will.”

“Cricket I know.” “Not cricket. This is an American game. Not the bloody British,” said Mr. Akhmed, putting on a cold affectation. “Make no mistake. First lesson of a Bengali at the baseball game—All American!”

“Yes, Imam.” Massoud began to bow.

Mr. Akhmed stopped him with his eyes. “Massoud. Did you remember the Ford Motors joke?”

Massoud nodded.

“Then just go. See what you can see. Now we pray.”

Mr. Akhmed stood up, and with a step and quick shift of his hip came around the desk. From the floor under the desk he rolled straight out a white curtain shade. The two men awkwardly maneuvered, Massoud following his Imam by a beat, and got down on their knees. The both scooted back a bit and bent over deeply, their palms on the floor, their heads bowed toward the poster of Dick Webber and toward Mecca 5000 miles beyond. After a minute they sat back on their haunches, eyes closed, and mouthed some silent verses. Then they rose in unison and solemnly shook hands. Massoud walked out of the office, past the counter—there were never any customers at Leroy’s Pro Shop on non-league bowling nights—and out into the bar area. Magnus had left and would be making his way to his seat now.

Mr. Akhmed closed the leather-bound Qur’an and Hadith on the desk and placed them in a standing locker. Behind the counter, he turned on the radio. The Yankee station. He left the lights on in the shop, with its racks of new balls, dark black ones, parti-colored ones, solid aqua and orange, and a glass case full of bowling gloves, resin bags and ball-shining kits. He put on a red Yankee cap and left the shop, closing the door behind him. He stepped quickly through the bar area and caught up to Massoud well before he got to the Will Call booth to pick

up his ticket.

“I’ll go tonight. A nice night,” he said to Massoud, who didn’t seem surprised. “Just sit in the shop for me till eight o’clock and then go home. Tell Kerwin behind the bar when you go. Go home to your wife and kids and don’t worry about anything. Pray.”

“Yes, Imam.”

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“So dis is where all da dicks hang out,” said a man with a big swagger as he entered the men’s room. He said it as if directly to Magnus, who was standing in line and moving from foot to foot, not having urinated since just before his train pulled into New York. Magnus paid him no mind, but he wasn’t expected to: guffaws from around the dank room proved the real audience for the loudmouth. “See what Boomah’s packin’ ta-night,” the big man added, letting the assembled in on his current thinking.

Magnus finally moved to a vacant urinal, and stood there along a wall with a dozen other men holding their penises daintily, half of them looking down at their member, the others looking somewhere else. Magnus looked straight ahead at the sweating tile four inches in front of his face.

“Christ, I just paid for this swill,” said the jokester, now astride the urinal to Magnus’s left. “It was eight bucks goin’ down. Tasted good. Hey.” The man had another thought. “I should just piss it back in the cup, give it to Sully. Hey Sully?”

Magnus zipped up, his bladder so relieved he felt almost light-headed. He thought of washing his hands but the guy who grunted to the call of “Sully” was pissing in the sink.

As Magnus arrived at his seat everyone was rising for the playing of the national anthem. Magnus could remember a time when everyone sang along—was expected to; and he also remembered a time, at a college football game probably in the late ’70s, when just as many people sat through the anthem as stood, and but a few mouthed the words. Now, once again, everyone sang, and even teenagers with backward caps took them off. War’ll do that. He put his hand over his heart and sang along.

For about 30 seconds, Magnus pondered his Americanness. Isn’t that was the anthem is for? What was it all about? Was it good for him? He could’ve been born anywhere. Being parentless, what was his country, his ancestry? He was a moveable feast. What roots? He was a half century along and he had no connections. He was a citizen of nothing, that’s what he thought. And who cared? He listened for a protest to his own disavowal and heard none. One bit of luck—Sadie for a year. One year when he had something he lost and found himself in. However mistaken-

ly. Two things: he'd missed the Vietnam war, by a year. He would have gone, like a donkey. He'd have come back in a bag or in leg irons, a deserter, a coward. "And the home... of the..... brave!"

"Tell that to the Indians," he said under his breath.

"Play ball!" shouted the man next to him, refitting his red Yankee cap.

"This is your seat?" asked Magnus.

"Yes, I have a ticket. You must be Massoud's friend. Thank you for leaving it, Magnus Cooney."

"And you must be Sammy?"

"Ah yes. Sammy I am," said Mr. Akhmed, offering his hand.

The crowd was in a big excitement as the start of the game neared. Rock music blared—no more "Georgia, George-ah," but an old song from The Who, Magnus thought, from the album where they are all pissing on a wall. How appropriate."

"Did Massoud find his cousin?" Magnus asked, sitting down, having to shout it, and wondering what to do with the clear bag of tupperware.

"Yes, but Massoud had to go home. His brother, it turns out, needs him."

Magnus was unnerved. He liked Massoud and his gentle ways, his small, delicate manners. Sammy here was big, commanding, and the red Yankee cap made him look like some clueless imposter, as if everything were fake, the nose and glasses. Yankee blue would go so much better with the man's dark Indian skin, thought Magnus, before canceling the thought.

The first pitch was popped up and the whole crowd followed it into the stands, as if it were the only thing.

Magnus felt a weary exhilaration, as if he had just done a lot of running and now there was the promise of rest. Here before him was a ready diversion, a time-tested one, attested to by the tens of thousands of people in attendance, all of whom had made elaborate preparations (except for Magnus) to come, who had negotiated complicated routes—by car, by train, by cab, even by boat, and some who surely walked—to arrive to see the entertainment now on display. The crowd roared as a strike was called on, still, the first batter. There were so many more batters to come, on both sides, and a story would write itself, a story unknown at this point besides a two-strike count on Sean Burroughs, whose face and statistics were on the scoreboard in center field, to Magnus's extreme right. This was good. Magnus didn't even

really need to talk to anyone, all strangers, none more so or less so than the man sitting next to him. Sammy.

“So, how do you like the Yankees this year,” said Sammy, shouting a little to be heard over the crowd, now booing a called ball.

“Only what I read in the papers,” said Magnus.

“Then you know they have the best record in baseball, this year and for all time,” Sammy said, looking triumphantly at Magnus. Sammy was stunningly handsome, his teeth perfect and white. His jaw looked freshly shaven and the tendons in his neck jumped as he swiveled his head. He had a scent to him, like coconut, perhaps.

“They win every year, don’t they?” asked Magnus, knowing enough to know that was not technically true but hard to argue with.

“They have the most money, everyone complains,” said Sammy. “But they are smart. Look at Alex Rodriguez. They now have the best player in baseball for many years at a good price. How come no one else did that?”

“This kid is good. First year man, I think. His father was a player.”

The crowd in the bleachers was calling out every Yankee name in succession, while the game progressed, waiting for an acknowledgement from the player before moving to the next. Magnus watched Rodriguez—the highest-paid player in baseball—peer in toward the plate from his position at third base, and then look over his shoulder toward the bleachers in right field as they chanted his name, and wave his glove at them. He imagined for a second what that would be like—“Mag-nus Cooney, Mag-nus Cooney.” Magnus Cooney says “Hi” to the thousands cheering him on, interested in his every move. The kid struck out on a pitch in the dirt.

“I drink a beer now and then,” said Sammy, standing and raising his arm toward a vendor hulking up the steps with a case of Bud Lite cans. “How about you? On me.”

Magnus agreed, happily. Diversions amid diversions. Why not? The cans of beer were seven dollars. Magnus could get a six-pack of imported beer upstate for that. He was handed a paper cup brimming with foam, so much so he had to attack it with his mouth. The tart suds lathered his lips and chin but then he took down a long draught of the ice cold beverage, as did Sammy before sitting down. “Keep it,” he said to the beer vendor, who kept six dollars for his efforts.

By then, the Yankees were running off the field and the reign of music returned to the ball park. Everyone sat back and enjoyed the brief break in play. The organist, back at it, pounded out some inspiring chords, as the Yankees’ first batter prepared to hit.

“Bernie baby,” said Sammy. “He’s not hitting his weight, and he don’t weigh that much.”

Magnus snuck a peak at the scoreboard, which showed Bernie Williams to be hitting .257, but decided he would pass on the opportunity to correct this rabid baseball fan. He thought: Yankee fundamentalist?

Sammy began a long disquisition on the opposing pitcher. "You don't know him? Boomer Wells. Pitched a perfect game here six years ago. I saw it. Beautiful thing. Got everybody out, nine straight innings. Very rare. God was in the place that day, watching a ball game. It was the Sabbath, after all. Day of rest!"

Magnus didn't know what to make of this onslaught of commentary. Sammy kept going, about Wells's upbringing, his lifestyle, his "rubber arm." And it was only the first inning. Perhaps Sammy—and the crowd—would tire of investing every moment with commentary. The Yankee hitter grounded out to third.

"Here's Jeter." Sammy became quiet. He watched pitch after pitch silently—strike, ball, little foul ball. But then, Jeter struck out. Sammy exploded.

"Wells knows him! He can't handle the breaking ball in on the hands. Everybody pitches Jeter in, in, in, but hard stuff. Wells knows he can't hit the breaking ball in there! You watch now. Wells knows their weaknesses!"

Then Sammy looks directly at Magnus. Magnus, nervous, nods.

By the time a long-haired blond kid with the odd name of Khalil Green hits a home run for the Padres to give them the lead, Sammy and Magnus have had another 16-ounce beer and the steady stream of commentary has not abated. Magnus can't relate to his notion of what seems hours ago that the evening would be a relaxing event. The home run inspires a paroxysm from Sammy.

"The Vasquez. Long ball, long ball, long ball. We gave up Nick Johnson for this guy? Forget it!" He went on to talk about the difference in the pitchers in each league. Magnus knew something of Vasquez, because he had been the only good pitcher on the Montreal team for years, and the local papers covered the Expos like they were the hometown team. Losers for losers. But wasn't this enough?

Sammy stood up to go to the bathroom, and Magnus welcomed the quiet, even though he too had to go. He decided to sit it out. Meanwhile, the Yankees kept going out easily for Wells, who seemed to be still a crowd favorite. Between innings, Magnus looked to the roof of the stadium. The sky was now black beyond the bright lights. It was nearly 8:30. He thought he could see a metal glint from what could be the two figures he'd seen earlier, up on the catwalk.

Magnus scanned the seats around him. Down below were the two yarmulked boys. Coincidence. He'd seen them on the train. Near the

railing was a young woman in a white halter, her back muscles beautifully cleaved by her spine, everything disappearing into her short shorts without swell, and that same tawny skin emerging in the narrowing sweep of both thighs. He noticed the balled muscle of her calves—she was on her toes, clapping to the music, her auburn French braid swinging freely. Magnus swallowed. He could smell himself. He took his windbreaker off and unbuttoned his shirt to the chest, letting himself cool. He could use a cigarette, or something to eat. He remembered the pita pockets in the tupperware. But a search around the seats turned up nothing. Had he left it somewhere? What else was in it? Would he ever see Massoud again? What in hell was he doing?

No one was smoking. Although Magnus could remember the clouds of cigar smoke that hung in the stands when he came here as a boy, the men in straw hats chewing on El Productos, there was none of that now. Where was Sammy? Magnus decided to make his own trip to the bathroom and see if there was perch from which he could smoke.

He made his way down the steps, passed unnecessarily close to the tanned beauty in the halter, and found the men's room. It was relatively empty and he relieved himself in peace. On leaving, he saw a few folks down the ramp who were lighting up, so he joined them. They were drunk and wavering, but happy enough. Further down the ramp he could see a cop's distinctive blue hat and he doused his smoke. As the cop turned toward the next level he saw that it was Officer Fincher. He trotted back toward his seat, which he found easily, thanks to the red Yankee hat—Sammy back in his seat.

"You've been smoking, Magnus Cooney. I can smell it."

"So fucking what," said Magnus, whistling to a beer vendor to come up with two more.

They sipped their beers in silence. Even the hometown rooters cut it out, with their team losing 1-0, Sammy's "Boomer" dispatching the opposition effortlessly. Once Magnus's body cooled from having uttered his angry reply, the night resumed its calming rhythm: gentlemen and ladies, their children, sitting of a summer evening watching a game of sport. The mood was light. The crowd seemed to find its greatest merriment in a stunt pulled by the grounds crew between innings, as they danced on the field to what Magnus recalled as a gay anthem: "Y-M-C-A." No harm, no foul. The world was a wonderful place.

Perhaps the alcohol was rendering this beneficence; surely Sammy shutting his trap deserved an assist, but that might have been alcohol-assisted as well. Magnus's mind roamed. His gut released its tension. He openly passed gas and spread out as much as he could into the aisle.

Fuck it. Sadie's smile flashed to him as he looked along the rim of the stadium. Her smile... She liked it when he was rude, assertive. It was so rare. Raw and rare. Like a steak? Enough.

Magnus started to recollect the day in order to remind himself of where he was. He forced back, again, the image of Sadie's face, down into the swamp of bad memories from whence it came. He took some pride in the possibility that, symbolically, he had killed his brother. This felt better... He had given him the golden calf; he had sacrificed the one woman he had loved, to him, that she would bring him to his end. He had told her wonderful things about Ted when it was clear she felt Magnus would never make it as her lover in life. When it was clear that Magnus would never see expressing neediness as the key to intimacy. Sadie would say, "Tell me what you want." But Magnus could not want what he had to ask for. Once he asked for it, the gift was tainted, like a Christmas gift you already knew was coming. Deep down, he really felt that all Sadie was interested in was a justification for her own endless expressing of her needs. And he told her so. And that was that. "You should talk to Baby Teddy," he told her. "He'll need you out of house and home."

"That's what I want, don't you see?" She was crying. Of course she was.

That was pretty much the end of Sadie and Magnus, right there on his chenille bedspread with the cowboy with the lariat on it. So they made love there for the last time, Sadie's fingers grabbing at the little knots of chenille and Magnus, during the act, actually brushing her hand away. He'd grown up with that bedspread. The world was a terrible place, Magnus reflected, as the crowd was called to rise for Kate Smith singing "God Bless America."

"Where's the food?" asked Magnus, bending over a bit, looking around, as if lifting imaginary tails.

"Gone," said Sammy, dismissively. "You cannot leave anything in this city. Thieves."

Magnus looked at him. Alright.

The home team was down 2-0, and they were going quietly again. Barely two hours had passed. Magnus had heard that games nowadays went on interminably, with pitching changes, batters preening in the batter's box, adjusting their accessories, long advertising breaks to promote beer, cars and Viagra, but this game seemed downright brisk. Still, he'd about had enough. He was thinking of that hotel Massoud had mentioned. But then he was back to being hungry.

"I was supposed to give the tupperware to you! And there was a radio in there!" Magnus recalled this with some alarm. "And there's a shaver

back in his backpack.” Magnus thought he might be shouting.

“Thieves,” Sammy said calmly. “I’ll take care of the backpack. Just give me the ticket.”

Sammy squirmed like he’d just made a mistake. Magnus thought he might be whining. He nodded okay and swallowed down the last of his beer.

As the crowd was whipped up between innings by some country & western tune, a foot-stomping hoe-down number that inspired grown men, young ladies and children to dance some kind of chicken dance in the aisles, Magnus had that feeling he’d had most of his life, on and off. A sense that he was locked in some solitary cell with a blurry view and its own muffled acoustics; beyond him a world of mysterious, merry antics, alien and exclusionary in their intensity. A world of joy minus Magnus, Magnus removed from the dance, hiding in the crepe paper. Once, in a stone-cold car on some back road during his college years—the only time he’d sampled a hallucinogen—he saw himself inhabiting an neat incision in the space-time continuum, a cut shaped like himself into which he perfectly fit, undetected. And he was the seam holding it all together, the suture, if only the world could heal around him and he would disappear into his own dream, thereby keeping reality in a state of what he decided was “patency.” He went down into that place—beneath patency?—and there he saw a microcosm of the outer world, and this, he decided was art or “art-genius.” It was a small construction that he could walk up to in his mind: two mirrors facing each other, infinitely reflecting each other’s entirely empty and depthless surfaces. He was fetched back from psychological oblivion that night by the roar and swirling lights of a snowplow that nearly sideswiped the car, but which woke him up back to the Magnus Cooney who had biochem in the morning. Sammy nudged him awake.

“A home run! The Nissei!”

Magnus was confused.

“Sushi time!”

As Magnus tried to get his bearings by finding the scoreboard, the crowd extremely loud and standing all around him, there was a louder roar.

“God almighty!” shouted Sammy. “Lofton!”

The game, it seemed, was tied, just when the Yankees had been down to their last out.

Extra innings.

The crowd seemed entirely re-energized, and Sammy explained why.

“New game, Magnus. Fresh start. Did you see those guys who left early? Gave up!”

Magnus was speechless at this point. He was suffering the slow abandonment of all his senses. He was growing numb, he could find no energy to speak; what he heard was mostly noise, nonsensical. What he saw was bright but undifferentiated chaos. He smelled nothing but the world—of sweat, of beer, or cigarettes on his own breath; the spices of otherness and that of something flat and stale.

“Have you read the Karamazov Brothers?”

Was this for real?

“What?”

“The Russian, Dostoyevsky,” said Sammy.

Magnus said he’d tried, in college. Notes from the Underground.

“Yea. I read a depressing book about being in jail or an asylum or something,” he said.

Sammy began to work his fingers quickly at his trousers, pressing a vertical crease along his thigh.

“The Grand Inquisitor. You have not read The Grand Inquisitor chapter?”

Magnus could not recall having done so. It was one of his major regrets in life—not reading more. Sammy was happy to fill him in, bizarrely, in the 10th inning of a Yankee game in the midst of his directionless sojourn.

“It is about how the Catholic people, and really all the people of the Book, even the Jews, prefer mystery over the answer. The Inquisitor, and this is Spain, in the 16th century, after the Muslims—the Moors,” he clarifies with an acid tone, “have been terrorized, their beautiful culture, of art, and music, of fair trade, has been crushed, shamed, defeated. And the Inquisitor comes face to face with God himself. After a most terrible burning of hundreds of infidels—an *auto da fe*, Magnus, fire of faith—God himself raises a seven-year old child from the dead; she rises out of her death box by this act of God on earth, who has come to stop the killing. He has come to unite the people. Islam, the religion of surrender, of the last prophet, the third and last of the Abrahamic religions; Islam, the uniter of Moses and Jesus, a descendant of Abraham, he who came to clarify all the confusions, to wipe away the mysteries, to make living and loving the One God a simple decision of surrender, Islam has already been banished. The Crusades have done their work. Now the Jews are burning. The Catholics are now set to conquer the world; they are about to ‘discover’ the New World and begin a slaughter there of innocents who saw God everywhere. But the Inquisitor”—Magnus leans close to hear, as the crowd cheers their Yankees on, their Gods—“he in turn lectures our God and tells him in a way no one can hear but

Dostoevsky, a man driven nearly mad by knowledge of the fallen world, that the world has made its peace with mystery, and cannot now be asked to live with the Truth. Men have been given the freedom to doubt, and so terrified they surrender their souls to the Church. So he slaughters the one God on Earth, the true God, not a prophet, but the embodiment of God himself. And now look at what we have!”

The crowd is intent on the Yankees stopping the opposition so that they may have a chance to win this game they thought they had lost.

“What we have?” Magnus manages.

“We have the same struggle, Magnus Cooney. Are you blind? Don’t be blind. The answer is here, once again. Islam is making its case once again. The world has suffered another five centuries of degradation. The earth is weeping. There is more suffering now than there has ever been—more starvation among the people, more disease. The earth and the air and the waters are sick. People are sick. Do you know that half the children in the world are starving. Do you know that this is more than a billion people?

Do you know that hundreds of thousands of people eat birdseed from Oxfam? Read the Qur’an, Magnus. It is not full of nonsense; not full of more mystery upon mystery. It is a clear way of life. Of course it could not have come before it did. The Great Book has all the answers but it had become so obscured, so corrupted by men seeking their own glory. The word of God, as told by Gabriel to Muhammad, is the way—Shari’ah. It tells you everything. Magnus, it even as a tax code, marriage laws, estate law, dietary law, codes of dress. And it tells one how to find the God within one’s self. It is God itself, you know, in its very words. When one recites the Qur’an in Arabic, that is God, God existing there in the air you move into your lungs and out through your voice box and into the world. God spoken, speaks. You should listen, Magnus.”

The Yankees have failed to stop a San Diego rally. Padres circle the bases to the sour notes of air gassing from a balloon. At last the crowd seems defeated. It is 5-2 San Diego in the 12th inning. More people leave, empty cups and bags blowing in their wake.

Credit Cooney. He might have been an innocent in the big city, a boy from the country with maybe a backpack’s of worldliness to his credit, a man now with some extremely tawdry troubles—a freshly dead brother, a disfigured, probably life-support girlfriend and an adoptee to boot, a real Jerry Springer candidate—but he knew, despite the exhaustion and disorientation coming on him like a drug, that he was being worked. He looked Sammy—who was this guy?—in the eye. He suddenly sounded like his brother. “Enough of this shit!” He got up to leave.

“Where are you going, sit down,” said Sammy, grabbing his forearm.

“No fucking way. What is all this?”

“Watch,” said Sammy, looking back on the field. “Watch.”

In the bottom of the 12th. A walk, a hit, a double, a hit, a walk. All in rapid succession. Yankees scoring. Then a long drive that fell to the ground in center field, and the Yankees, just like that, scored four runs to win the game, 6-5. The crowd, what was left of it, was delirious. Sammy was up and raving. So was Magnus, sort of it, not raving, but up and having it all pour into him.

Suddenly, Sammy said, “Let’s go.” And as the fans stood and cheered the dramatic comeback, their heroes, cavorting on the field in some impromptu choreography to Frank Sinatra’s “New York, New York,” the two of them scooted down the stairs and out the tunnel, blending into stream of moving people, most of them shaking their arms out and clapping.

“This is what I mean, Magnus. You saw those boys there, didn’t you,” said Sammy. Another oration, thought Magnus. “Probably from Brighton Beach—they were on the 4 train with us. The yarmulkes. They’d seen a good game, a beautiful game, but they didn’t really believe a miracle would happen. They’d seen enough to satisfy them—you saw when they left? A dignified defeat. They left after the eighth. When Hoffman came in. Hoffman is a killer. One hundred miles per hour.

“Those guys, to our right. The shamrocks—one had an O’Neill jersey on. They saw the miracle. You saw when they left? They stayed through their beers”—Magnus, though not interested in these points, was by now jammed shoulder to shoulder with his Middle East swami or whatever he was. “They saw the game tied, in the ninth, but then—last call over—they didn’t believe in a second coming. They didn’t want to be around for the comeback to be for nothing.

“But we stayed, Magnus. You and me. Because we know—I know and now you know—that miracles can not only happen. But miracle can succeed miracle. And there you have it.”

“Have what?”

“Four runs in the bottom of the 12th!” yelled Sammy. “You see! For those who stay, another miracle. This is the word of God. This is why the good and the patient will triumph, this is how they will triumph. Tonight, here. The Bronx, New York. Tomorrow, where?”

When the pod of people within which Sammy and Magnus were traveling spilled out of the stadium onto street level, for a moment sanity and normalcy seemed to return. The air was fresh and the night large. There was a breeze and there was traffic and vendors hawking souvenirs to the happy fans. Magnus tried to stop for a moment to gather himself in the new space, but the others pressed by him with what seemed a rudeness.

But in a flash, the rudeness switched to a new excitement. There were sirens and cars screeching. Sammy pulled Magnus through the crowd so that the cold stadium outer wall was against their backs. Shoe leather and sneaker bottoms slapped by. “What? Where?” The night turned black and red in strobes. The two of them moved slowly around the stadium. A pool of police menace sat under the elevated tracks. Horse-mounted cops corralled three or four police cars. Swords of flashlight played on the underside of the tracks and everyone looked up, to where a piece of rail seemed to be hanging down. Sammy squeezed Magnus’s forearm hard, till it hurt. There were loud intakes of breath, then oaths. The homely soles of two bony feet slowly circled in the air above them. It was a man, hanging. “Take this”—Sammy handed Magnus a small thick envelope. “Pick up Massoud’s backpack. Read what’s in the envelope. Go.” Sammy then gently held Magnus’s shoulders and placed a kiss on his lips, then stepped back and, fighting against the onrush of onlookers, disappeared into the crowd.

Magnus shot a glance at the body now being wrestled up through the tracks. The man’s head lolled, and Massoud’s dead eyes looked at nothing and everything.

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There was no one watching the bag-check at Pro Bowl Lanes. Magnus, whose back now ached, whose bowels rumbled, whose bladder seemed to hold its liquid breath; this man who craved a cigarette anew, who’d love a whiskey to steady his nerves; whose friend of half a day now hung dead from above the street, and whose brother (half) moldered in a northern grave and who’d just seen an amazing ball game with a mysterious Muslim who had given him papers and cryptic instructions, reached above his head and pulled down Massoud’s rucksack. Magnus thought these things, more or less, in the way of that activity whereby we remind ourselves who and where we are, and on a day like this, Magnus had availed himself several times of active self-consciousness—this is me!—just to keep a grip.

The bar and the lanes were empty. All the patrons and employees were on the street, where splashes of yellow and ruby light fell across the stolid Yankee portraits along the wall—one particular Klieg light giving a skyward-looking Babe Ruth, following the flight of a ball, a look of horror and wonder, as if he were witness to the rapture.

A pinball machine pinked and whirred unattended—perhaps it was the brains behind all this. Leroy’s Pro Shop was shut and closed. Magnus looked into the mirrored window and took a shock. A man standing there within flinched and then held still, as if he were aware he’d been

seen robbing the shop. Then he leaned forward, as Magnus did—it was Magnus himself, in reflection, but he could hardly recognize himself: thinner, his hair ruffled and thicker, tousled—his hair had never tousled; his cheeks were hollow, or hollow-er, and the tendons in his neck were pronounced, as if he worked out. He carried with him a narrow gravitas, like Gregory Peck, a man of blade-like substance. The rucksack in his hand did not look preposterous, as all rucksacks do, but casual, as if Jack Kerouac were holding it, or McQueen, guys who took possession of nothing, who, at most, passed things along; he felt free.

So, he found the men's room. He moved quickly. Excited thoughts about some transformation underway helped him measure himself till positioned on the toilet, where feces shout out of him in successive jets, as if he were turning on and off a mud faucet. Then his bladder emptied in such joyous release that he began to get erect toward the end, which he fought down in order to fully drain himself.

Magnus wiped himself quickly but thoroughly as he thought it was likely he would die in these clothes.

When Magnus exited the bathroom he found a still-empty bar. Why not? From a stack of shot glasses he set up two, three. At the service end of the bar he could reach the back bar. There was a bottle of Jameson there, not in its place, but where the bartender put it perhaps the moment word came in that Massoud had met his fate. Magnus poured himself two, three. And sank them. Then he hit the night with his rucksack, his envelope shoved within, his wallet, his watch—11:45—his Marlboros. He lit one up as he moved south and west towards the lights of Manhattan, away and around the bloody excavation project on River Avenue in the Bronx.

Beyond the stadium it was dark—or mostly so: gowns of light fell from well-distanced street lamps. Magnus found Jerome Avenue, which seemed to go across a bridge. He passed an empty parking lot, and empty rail yard—and then he was up on the bridge over an empty river, and then over a fairly busy roadway.

The bridge got higher and higher, or the level of land mass—the Bronx left behind, Manhattan ahead—got higher and higher. The bridge was deserted of pedestrians but for one man sitting on the railing, silhouetted against the western sky, backlit by upper Manhattan island. Magnus could see him from far off, and was wary in his approach, which meant Magnus took his hands out of pocket and stayed wide.

“Evenin,” said the man in an Irish accent.

“Hello.” “How's it goin', thar, Yank?”

“Um. Yanks won,” said Magnus, slowing.

“Fook the Yanks, Yank. I’m a Mets fan I am.”

“What are you looking at?” Magnus asked as the man, about 40 years old and with a hint of vomit about him, stared out into the black.

“What am I lookin’ at?” The man peered straight down below him, as if looking for what it was he was looking at, or confirming that it was not there. Then he looked back up, level with about the 10th floor of an apartment complex a couple of hundred feet away.

“I’m lookin’ at nuttin’,” he said, spitting out the last word. “I’m listenin’.” “Listening to what,” said Magnus, continuing what now seemed a listless rally, but which was somehow comforting.

“Well, listen for yerself then.”

They both listened. Out of nothing, sounds assembled as if auditioning. Auditioning to be heard to two men there to listen. The bridge steel creaked and moaned, as did the foghorn, hoarse and final and fading into a kind of horn fog; the lariat-swinging rhythm of the sirens, and the general thrum of the city night. A hypnotic state could be had, given enough time.

“Hear that?” said the Irishman sharply, breaking the spell, or so Magnus thought.

But Magnus had heard that. It was, as they say, the crack of a bat. And then he could hear feet pounding and pounding, accelerating, as if running something out, as if now rounding first base, slowing a bit but clapping the ground just as hard, then around second and still running.

“You don’t hear that?”

“Yea. Shshsh.”

As if rounding third, the strides slowing some and then a silence—one imagines the runner airborne—and a walloping skid and slide.

Magnus looks at the Irishman who looks back at him and then intones in a priestly fashion, as if addressing the Eucharist: “The greatest player who ever played the game. Willie Mays.”

Back to the silence and the staring across the way. No one seemed awake in the apartment building.

“Are you alright,” asked Magnus.

“I am.”

Magnus moved on, headed up the hill above the bridge.

The Irishman was shouting: “Welcome to the Polo Grounds.”

Ghosts, thought Magnus. He looked back.

Ghosts alright. The man was nowhere to be seen.

It was midnight. Behind Magnus, Yankee Stadium remained full lit and brocaded in its surround by slow-spinning cherry tops, as if the stadium itself had been cornered and had given up. From 155th and Amsterdam,

Magnus looked south down the hill, through the heavily Dominican and increasingly gentrified Washington Heights area, before the land mass rose once again in the heart of Harlem at 125th street, before sloping again, down through the Columbia University properties, past St. John the Divine then into the fancy Upper West Side, a string of restaurants and bars. Magnus surprised himself that he knew all this or thought he knew it—is this from his Seinfeld years, of the osmosis from friends who watched Friends. Maybe he was just guessing; maybe he persuaded himself that there was nothing to be learned by walking his way down through there, or so his aching legs counseled.

Where an avenue named Edgecomb came in from the north (oddly, it was on a road of the same name far upstate where he'd left his signature in white paint on a roadside stone; was it still there and was this, somehow, the terminus of that road?) and 155th met St. Nicholas, 113 blocks north of where he began the day, was a subway stop. And though the trains, he could see, still sat still outside Yankee Stadium, these would surely be running. The C train, for Cooney, to Carter Hotel, for convenience, conveyance, for cancer, for canny. For cause. For crissakes, for all the cocksucking stars in the sky that meant nothing to him. *Contraire!* And vice versa.

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Magnus made the best of things, always had. Or always thought he had, at least since whenever it was, whatever age it was, he was challenged to justify his ways in life, which mostly involved devising a game strategy for behaviors he couldn't seem to avoid, like making the best of things. It could have been other behaviors he sought to justify, if he'd had those behaviors—always settling for second best, say, or doing without rather than accepting second best, or sticking with something, through thick and thin, being steady, constant (“to a fault!”), loyal (“to a fault!”), changeable, flighty, shallow and charming, insecure and irreverent, bright and afraid, saintly and superior, selfless and guilt-ridden, cruel, generous, honest, depressed, always fucking happy. But for Magnus, it was just making the best of things, which seemed the only way for him, the only choice, which makes it hardly a choice. But one of the things Magnus had learned was that, despite the unavailability of being himself, he did have different ways to characterize his behavior. Couldn't he just as easily be a man who did not so much make the best of things as make the least of things, it being easier than making more of things to just settle for what was there and consider it the best the situation could produce.

Seated on a bench in the absolutely empty subway station, Magnus looked into Massoud's bag.

There's no escaping consciousness, thought Magnus. At least not now. No break like in the movies to another scene; or in books—he read a William Faulkner novel one summer, at Sadie's insistence—where you could tire of the voice of an idiot and switch channels. There's no escaping, when alcohol won't do it, you're too timid or wise for hard drugs, and sleep is just a down time, a blank, not an escape to be experienced.

There is no escape when someone else is writing your story, someone you don't know. Magnus wished he could remember the very cool quotation from which the Faulkner book got its title.

The bag of a dead man. Now, a promising movie could begin that way. Tom Hanks, playing an old man, could sit on a subway bench and go through the bag of a dead friend, and each item could then be dramatized to tell a story. But as the story unfolded, you would realize—you being the viewer, the guest, the royalty being entertained by the striving troupe—just how the friend came to be dead and what Tom Hanks's role was and why he was sitting there and why he should probably get a move on if he is to avoid the fate we may not wish for him, or which in any case might not be deserved.

We could argue, and urge, “Check into a hotel, man!”—a move, a simple, reasonable move that would have naturally occurred to dozens of protagonists in various films but which would have ruined the blessed story if they had done so. Better to sit tight, or lock the windows, or turn out the lights, or get into bed and pull the covers up, or turn on the TV while danger lurks outdoors and picks its spot. The phrase “unity of place” came into Magnus's mind, as if it itself were an address where something happened. Was it something Magnus has read, somewhere, about the theater? It was! As Magnus got drunker, more tired—tireder—older, freer—more free—thinner, hungrier, he was getting more smart, smarter. Yes, unity of place: one of the Aristotelian precepts for dramatic structure, keeping the family at home in Cape Fear, trip wiring their own place. Wasn't this working in America, too?

A terrible rumbling was heard, heavy weight trundled in a wobbly fashion and too fast and as it got very loud—Magnus thought he saw large wooden beams and stone masonry collapsing in a deluge of force—it stopped. Pneumatics were heard, and musical tones. The doctor will see you now. Then the trundling again and Magnus tried to go after it, tried to beat it out the door, be in front of the building thunder, ahead of the storm, but he missed it, and he awoke to the red lights on the ass of the C train

heading south out of the station.

On the platform, making to move and then deciding not to, was the lady officer, Fincher. Magnus looked at her and she looked above him as if at someone. Magnus looked over his shoulder and there was the belly of the guy he'd seen in the men's room at the stadium, pissing in the sink. On closer inspection, Magnus recognized the face, too: Fincher's cop partner from this morning.

Magnus felt lucid.

"You two think you're following me. Don't you?"

Fincher remembered to look at Sullivan with a certain impersonal interest: "?"

"Whaddya mean?" said Sullivan thickly.

"*You think I think you're following me.*" Cooney spelled it out. "Admit it."

"I don't know about him there," said Fincher, swinging her chin toward Sullivan, "but I'm waitin' for the C."

"It just left. You missed it, sister."

"Because of ... what?"

"Because you're following me. But I don't think that. You do."

"??"—Sullivan, to Fincher.

Magnus stretched his arms out on the back of the bench. He yawned. Fincher, meanwhile, looked down the tunnel. She had a Giambi jersey on.

"Giambi sucks, officer."

"I'd watch the language, sir," said Sully, positioning his gut—he also had a Yankee shirt on, shortsleeved t-shirt, Matsui—over the back of the bench, just to Magnus's left.

"I don't piss in sinks, officer, so save the etiquette speech.

"??"—Sullivan, to Fincher, who was making her way back down the platform and now stood in front of Magnus.

She was actually quite beautiful, in that Sandra Bullock sort of way, where the imperfections—a half-cracked smile, lopsided cleavage, a large ear—are simply sites where spirit has outclassed some kind of body narcissism. A guy's gal, a broad, maybe, who looked like she might rather be playing a hand of poker and swirling whiskey in a glass than divining what Mr. Magnus Cooney intended. And Magnus noticed that she had a little pyre of disgust burning in her left eye for the beer-bellied Sullivan.

"He pees up right now, Sully." Magnus couldn't hide his erection. And he didn't even want to. Here!

"That's public lewdness. A 707. I could write you up," said Sullivan,

in defense of his damsel.

“You know what else you can do.”

“Sir,” said Fincher, swinging around and sitting next to Cooney and—to Cooney—thrillingly placing her hand on his knee—“we’re all gonna get on the next train. Whenever the fuckin’ thing comes.” She cast an impatient look up the track again. And then, Magnus thought, she peaked at his groin.

Sullivan burred something that sounded like a reservation. Fincher sighed and with her eyes excused herself from Cooney and went over the Sullivan. They walked a ways down the platform.

After a minute, which for Magnus was filled with every one of its seconds, Sullivan’s heavy tread could be heard moving away and then the tap-tap-tap-tap up the stairs to the street. Magnus had closed his eyes. When he opened them, Fincher was kneeling down between his legs. As her left hand was busy lifting her breasts out of her bra cups, the thumb and forefinger of her right approached Magnus’s belt buckle.

Magnus penis was already edging above his belt line. He pulled his shirt up to show her. His stomach seemed nearly flat to him. This life was suiting him! Fincher tucked her hair back over her big beautiful left ear and she bent down and licked the very tip of his penis and the stitch of skin beneath it.

“Can’t we just look at it,” she said, gravely.

“??”—Cooney.

In the space of a handful of heartbeats the buckle was undone, the zipper down, and cock and balls were standing in the cup of Lisa Fincher’s palm. She then went down on Magnus one full stroke. Magnus looked at the confusing tangle of wire work above him, beginning to follow the green one under the red one when the train came in.

“Fix yourself,” said Fincher. “We’re not missing this one.” She winked at Cooney, whose spirits were crashing inside like the south tower. But the NYPD was rushing to the rescue. The wink did it, and her grabbing his hand.

The gal in the Giambi jersey and the guy in the windbreaker stepped through the closing doors of the C train. They sat down.

“I mean,” said Cooney, “you think you’re following me. But you’re following someone else, is all.”

Fincher, resettling her breasts in their slings, shot him a warm, wordless glance and handed him Massoud’s bag.

Magnus always thought he was being someone else, but not in the simple sense of pretending. Magnus felt he *was* someone other than the person he was somewhere else, that he possessed both a past life and a par-

allel life, but neither were his real life, the one he woke up to every day. The real life was filled with so many memories of other places, with other languages, of other times, and with such a high degree of detail that he was convinced he could not possibly be just making it all up. His tendency, forever, it seemed, of finding French words in English ones—never seeing an EXIT sign without converting it to Tixe and making the T an F before he'd ever heard or read the term prix fixe, or saying “mal a la tummy” to the shocked school nurse after the shop teacher had fucked him hard in the ass. Or the landscapes he'd known without knowing—they were countless, surely a lifetime's supply: the dirt road emerging from the woods into a back yard, the rutted driveway along the side of a clapboard house with a wooden stair and railing ascending to the upper floors; a small median with rose bushes behind a wrought-iron gate across from a sprawling city home; the smell of cooking orange rinds in a ship's kitchen; church bells heard from an attic; skating on wooden skates on a pond in the center of a wintry village, though this last he thought might have been the visual residue from a Currier & Ives print his mother once had as a calendar.

The two school shrinks he'd had thought the trauma of adoption led to these fantasies of another life, a ghost kingdom they both called it, as if these were sights and sounds not of places he'd been but of places he would have gone. Dr. Fraad (no jokes) even posited that Magnus's worst agrammatical habit—“would have went”—showed how uncomfortable he was with the past subjunctive.

“Read it,” she said.

Inside Massoud's bag, documents. Are thy documents false, they inquired of the fabulist. No, verily.

Did Ivan really write a poem about the Grand Inq? Did Dostoy?

They were sitting on the bed at the Hotel Carter on 43rd Street. It was 3 a.m. Lisa Fincher had her Giambi shirt back on, but that was all. She sat cross-legged on the bed. Magnus's knuckles nestled in her warmest moistest place, where her heart beat. Lisa's stomach stood above his hand, a succession of hard strata of muscle, a sheer cliff over which her lovely breasts leaned attentively, down at Magnus, who was taking it all in. Lisa grabbed his hand, gently.

“Read it.” She spilled the contents of the bag at the end of the bed where there was still some blanket and spread—the rest was wetted sheet. Magnus was naked as ever, his body, or so it seemed to him, continuing

to shed excess flesh. He felt leaner and trim; his hard-on wouldn't quit; his forearms were corded with muscle and veins; his hair hung over his forehead rakishly, his features now flinty, not pasty. He was read to strike, ignite, blow. It was like the transformation that would happen to Jack Nicholson when he willed it.

"We know what they have on you, Magnus. We can guess what they want to do. And we want you to do it. If anyone of them was watching, for all they know I picked you up on the train and came here and fucked you, you out-of-towner."

"Then I don't want to read it," said Magnus, moving the papers with his feet. "Why read what they—They!—want me to read. When what I want is right here."

"Then I'll tell you." Lisa sifted through the loose papers and emptied the envelope of it sheaf.

"Tomorrow's—well, now today's—Burlington Bugle." She held up some pages printed off a Web site. " 'Brother Sought in Plank Road Death.' You are wanted for questioning. Footprints.... matching yours.... Let's see. Matching boots blah-blah-blah on your porch, were found. At the river bank. Roadside. Point of entry. Bouquet River. How do you say that?" She looked at Magnus. No verbal response.

"Also, 'investigators believe that the footprints are the same that lead to where the vehicle first left the road, 125 feet west on the Plank Road.'"

Magnus stretched out on his back next to Lisa and wanted her to continue explaining things to him but in a more intimate fashion when there was a loud knock on the door and then the phone ringing. A true movie moment! thought Magnus. Lisa leapt from the bed and pulled a hand gun from her pile of clothes. Where'd she hidden that?

"Answer the phone," she mouthed silently to him.

He did. "A package coming up, for me," he whispered. He couldn't whisper quietly enough. Where were the sounds of the city? There was only his heart beating, Lisa's steady breathing as she trained the gun on the door, and the rap of knuckles on the outside.

Time to check into a hotel, thought Magnus. Or, in this case, out.

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