

THE
OBJECT
LESSON

JORDAN
ORLANDO

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An index of the object's preponderance is the impotence of the mind—in all its judgements as well as, to this day, the organization of reality. The negative fact that the mind, failing in identification, has also failed in reconciliation, that its supremacy has miscarried, becomes the motor of its disenchantment.

T H E O D O R A D O R N O

CHAPTER I

I REMEMBER THE night that Nick Blanchard called me for the first time in five years and we went to the hospital. Right around then the young collegiate woman who had been working as a summer intern put in her last day and returned to New England and I realized that for her, years began and ended at odd times and were barely recognizable as years—I had sat across the newsroom talking on the phone to a city commissioner while she cleared out her desk, and as she came across a paper hat from the Fourth of July the time that had passed was visible, like the shadow that follows a searchlight. She said goodbye to me along with the others, giving me a casual handshake, and I got the message, reminded of what I'd almost done, so when the phone rang that night, just as I arrived home, I answered quickly, hoping it was her, but it was Nick, amazed at having reached me.

"I'm still here," I said. "It's been a long time, Nick."

"Listen," said the quiet, sandy voice I remembered well. "We've got a disaster here—Are you all right, buddy? You sound terrible."

"I just came in the door," I said, winded by the walk and by the narrow flights of stairs. "What do you mean, a disaster?"

"I mean an accident," said Nick. "You remember Douglas Taft? This neighbor of his called me right after he'd been picked up by the, you know, the ambulance, and she says they're—that the guy said—they're on their way to St. Mark's Hospital, you know, East Sixty-Eighth, so I'm heading up there."

"I don't understand," I said, catching my breath, dropping the mail to the floor—I heard Manhattan traffic beyond Nick's voice as I groped for a lamp, irritated at being disturbed, flattered that he had called. "Did she say what happened?"

"She doesn't— Mike, this is some hysterical woman, she's barely talking, she's saying there's blood everywhere and he's barely alive—I've been wasting time calling everyone and nobody's home. Look, are you going meet me? I mean otherwise, you know, I'll explain later."

"Jesus Christ," I said. "Is he all—"

"I don't know," Nick interrupted. "I tried the emergency room and they haven't arrived yet, so— Look, you'd better take a cab if you've got the money. I'm leaving now—You can meet me outside and we'll go in together."

"But what happened to him?" I asked, reaching into the closet—I had a battered brown corduroy jacket that I'd worn in the evenings all through the summer, and I wore it for the last time that night.

"I don't *know*, damn it," said Nick. "Something violent. Michael, just get up there."

By the time I left the subway and emerged onto a dim Manhattan street

corner it was seven-thirty and the air was washed in traces of grey but storefronts were glowing all around and the streets shone with reflections of headlights. The dark limestone walls of the hospital's Gothic façade were punctured by grimed windows bunkered shut with their backlit curtains drawn, the sawtooth battlements scissoring the sky, the cement ramps up to the gates of the emergency room blazing with halogen floodlamps, and Nick stood backlit in his overcoat near a stationary ambulance, occupying the ramp area as if it were a theatrical stage, wearing sunglasses and khaki pants and a black overcoat, his camera as always slung under his arm, drinking a bottle of beer. He was characteristically unshaven and his face had the geometry that I remembered well, but as he turned toward me with a relieved, resigned smile, I could see the effects of the passing years, the way his hair had thinned and receded, the ways in which the lines on his face had, as far as I could tell, become more pronounced. I put out my hand but Nick came forward and hugged me, his camera swinging painfully into my ribs, and before I could react I was hugging him back and there was a moment where I was looking across the back of his head at the shining surface of the ambulance—I remember this clearly—before we released each other.

“Nick, you bum,” I said, out of breath.

“Michael,” said Nick. “I don't believe it.”

“Waiting long?”

“Just got here. He's not— I've been inside,” Nick said dazedly, pointing over his shoulder as he lit a cigarette. “I asked at the, you know, the guy at the desk, and he told me to talk to the, um, some damn nurse in there, but”—Nick put the beer bottle down on the oil-stained cement, swaying towards the darkened doors—“but she's behind a curtain and the guard won't let me through. Let's go.”

We walked down a wide, clean corridor and I heard blurred voices and me-

tallic sounds, the voices mounting as we passed through wide metal barriers—The emergency room was cold and bright and saturated with the smells of alcohol, vomit, and coffee, broken by rows of dirty orange chairs and presided over by several hospital guards, and in the chairs, various people sat alone or in groups with their coats and hats on, ignoring the uniformed police officers whose belt radios blasted static and garbled voices. A middle-aged woman appeared to have fallen asleep, or passed out, with her tennis shoes removed, one alarmingly swollen and discolored foot splayed across an orange cushion that had been removed from the adjoining row of chairs, where two men dressed in brown uniforms like park rangers sat hunched over a single clipboard, using two pens to complete a printed form. As we entered, another door crashed open and a moaning Hispanic man on a steel stretcher covered by a white sheet stained with vomit was quickly wheeled through the room and pulled out through another door.

“I hate hospitals,” Nick said, guiding us towards a glassed-in alcove with a drawn white curtain, where a woman with a white plastic badge identifying her as A. BALDWIN R. N. stood poring over a sheaf of papers. I could see Nick clearly as he leaned to get the nurse’s attention and I noticed that he still looked older than me, his stylish appearance out of place against the hospital walls—I kept waiting for him to take off his sunglasses but he left them on almost that entire night. “Excuse me—You’re the lookout?”

“I’m the Triage nurse,” Baldwin said, pointing at Nick’s cigarette—She had flat dark hair and large glasses and looked to be in her twenties. “You’ll have to put that out, sir.”

“Sorry,” said Nick, nodding, dropping the cigarette on the linoleum and stepping it out. “I’m looking for Douglas Taft,” he said, gesturing with his hands. “Little white guy, your age— An ambulance just—”

“Douglas *Taft*,” Baldwin said, squinting at her forms. “Nobody knew his last name.”

“You saw him?” Nick asked, chin darting forward. “Is he— Is he all right?”

“I have no idea,” Baldwin said, looking past us as if caged. “Dr. McCord took charge of him right after I completed the initial classification—I’m just waiting for the EMS report and then I’m done with him. Are you family?”

“We’re friends,” I said, stepping forward. “I’m sorry— What does that mean, ‘initial classification?’ ”

“It’s a trauma case,” said Baldwin impatiently, “So he’s classed as Emergent—It’s just a categorical determination for Emergency Room patients. If you’ll have a seat, I’m sure that any—”

“Excuse me,” said an accented voice behind us, making me jump. The park rangers had walked over and the taller one—Martinez, according to his plastic name card—was holding out the clipboard. “Here’s the form for that John Doe.”

“Thank you,” Baldwin said brightly, reaching past Nick’s shoulder and taking the clipboard. “These are his friends—his last name is Taft,” she murmured, looking over the form and glancing at Nick and myself, compelling us to step out of the way. “You should have called in the vitals.”

“We were busy with the on-the-spot stabilization,” said Martinez. “Ringer’s Lactate—It’s all there.”

“Good,” said Baldwin, tapping the clipboard with her fingernails. “This is it? I can send it through with the entry form and you’re finished?”

“Yeah,” said Martinez, pointing with his thumb at the door. “Simple stab wound, Sturgis started the line”—He indicated the other paramedic—“and we brought him in. Look, there’s another call—we’re just waiting for the stretcher.”

“Stab wound?” said Nick, looking at me and at Sturgis. “Stab wound?”

What happened to him?”

“We don’t know,” said Sturgis in a heavy Brooklyn accent. “We got the call, we show up, here’s the kid lying in the, what, the vestibule, top of the stairs, this screaming woman in my face— Signs of a *struggle*, torn wallpaper, lock’s broken on the door—”

“No it wasn’t,” said Martinez, confused.

“Broken lock,” interrupted Sturgis, nodding emphatically. “You never notice anything—But heavy bleeding, the kid looks pretty shocky, she says it’s been half an hour, so we brought him in.”

“Okay, boys,” said Baldwin, nodding at the clipboard.

“Here’s the stretcher,” said Martinez, pointing. “Let’s shake a tail feather.”

“Look, the two of you could do me a favor,” Baldwin told us as the paramedics hurried away. “You’re friends of his—do you know if he’s covered by Blue Cross or Blue Shield?”

“He must have insurance, damn it,” Nick said angrily. “I wish you’d just let us—”

“If you could find his wallet,” Baldwin said quietly, pointing at a green plastic bag on the floor, “I could get his Social Security number for our records. That stuff should be with him anyway, if you could take it along.”

I knelt on the cold floor and began hunting through the bag, which contained Douglas’ clothes, damp and bloodstained and evidently torn off of him—on top was a white Brooks Brothers shirt on which the streaks of blood hadn’t dried, and the bottom half of the shirt, where the paramedics had torn it open, was almost entirely scarlet. I swallowed and moved the slippery shirt aside, reaching deeper into the bag and finding a pair of hand-tailored grey trousers, similarly torn and wet. I patted the wet pockets of the trousers and then fished in the left front pocket for Douglas’ wallet, shoving papers and a cigarette pack and

other detritus aside—a clear plastic box containing a microcassette dropped onto the floor, and I absently put this in one of my jacket pockets—and stood up with the calfskin wallet, thumbing through the neatly-arranged credit cards and the billfold, seeing an old Harvard student ID and eighty dollars in twenties. I handed Douglas' Social Security card to Nurse Baldwin and then stood there in a strange posture, arms out, wondering how to get the blood off my hands.

“Thank you,” Baldwin said, handing me some towel paper while looking at the card. “I think you can go through,” she said, pointing at the doorway where the guards were stationed—As she spoke, another stretcher was being wheeled into the room by two more paramedics, and I realized that we had already lost her attention.

Nick and I went through the guarded door into a darker area, where more patients on stretchers had been placed along the walls near curtained alcoves. The moment that I picked up the bag of bloody clothes, I realized that there was something heavy in it, something long and hard made of metal hanging in the bottom of the bag, and I carried it carefully as we hurried toward one of the alcoves—Douglas was behind the half-shut curtain, smaller and paler than I remembered, stripped to his underwear and draped in a blood-soaked white sheet, convulsing violently, pinned down against a stretcher by a white-knuckled nurse and a large, black-bearded man wearing a white coat and a stethoscope. “No, no, leave me alone,” Douglas was moaning, eyes tightly shut and watering, face flushed as his head thrashed back and forth, his pale body gleaming with sweat.

“He's going to shake the IV loose, Doctor,” the nurse said, struggling with Douglas' thin bare trembling arms.

“I think we can spare him another shot,” the man ordered another nurse, who began unwrapping a fresh syringe and swabbing a forked juncture in the shaking IV lead.

“Leave me *alone*,” Douglas cried out, bucking against the nurses’ grip as his entire body arched like a mainsail, his face twisted in agony.

“Douglas, you’re safe,” The bearded man was yelling down at him. “Listen to my voice—You’re in a hospital and you’re safe.”

“I’m falling,” Douglas screamed as one of the nurses lost her grip on his sweat-greased arms and his hands fluttered up to his throat, wet cheeks flashing as he screamed again, a bolt of pain, wordless and pure.

“Damn it, hurry up,” the bearded man was shouting at the nurse while managing to regain his grip on Douglas’ wildly thrashing arms, their struggle having tossed the bloody sheet aside to reveal a large blood-soaked cotton bandage round Douglas’ abdomen. “Listen to my voice,” the bearded man said. “Listen to my voice.”

“Oh, fuck, oh fuck, it hurts, it hurts,” Douglas was panting. “Oh, fuck, I’m falling—” The nurse had managed to get the syringe into the IV lead and was carefully injecting a small amount of clear fluid into Douglas’ blood.

“Douglas, can you hear me?” the bearded man intoned, bending over Douglas’ shivering body, pulling the sheet back up and gesturing toward one of the nurses for a blanket. “I’m Dr. McCord. Can you tell me your name?”

“Douglas Taft,” Douglas whispered, his panic-breathing having relaxed into a quiet panting. “Make it go away, make it go away,” he whispered rhythmically, a penitent whisper, closing his eyes as Dr. McCord draped the green blanket over him.

“Can you tell me where you live?” McCord said more quietly, adjusting the blanket and stretching his cramped arms.

“No,” Douglas whispered, tears rolling sideways off the corners of his eyes. “I go to Thorndike High School.”

“We’re his friends,” Nick said, stepping forward, pointing at Douglas.

“Just a minute,” the man snapped, glancing at us sharply and then turning back to the cot. “Douglas, I need some information from you.”

“Yes,” Douglas whispered, eyes still clenched shut, still breathing rapidly.

“I need your permission for surgery.”

“What?” Douglas whispered sharply. “Oh, Jesus—”

“Shh,” McCord said. “Don’t be scared—To make the pain go away we need to perform a small operation.”

“Okay,” Douglas whispered, still breathing heavily.

“Good. Get ready to move him,” McCord told the two nurses as he stood up and reached for another clipboard. “Douglas, I need you to answer some questions for the anesthesiologist—When did you last eat?”

“What?” Douglas had opened his brown eyes and was squinting vaguely at McCord.

“Do you remember when you last ate?”

“Um—” Douglas closed his eyes. “No.”

“Try to remember,” said McCord, writing on the clipboard.

“I had lunch,” Douglas whispered. “A long time ago.”

“Barker’s got it,” said a young Black man, another resident, walking past us into the alcove and making us jump. “Room Seven. She’s scrubbing now.”

“Good,” said McCord, handing the clipboard to one of the nurses and walking over to us. “I’m sorry. I’m Dr. McCord,” he said, his kind eyes moving rhythmically back and forth between us. “Your friend is very frightened but he’s stable—I’ve administered a codeine-based painkilling medication, which accounts for most of the disorientation you’re seeing.”

“You’re operating on him?” I said, clearing my throat.

“He’s suffered an abdominal puncture wound involving massive blood loss,” McCord told us, rubbing his eyes, “as well as the danger that one or more

large vessels has been damaged, so we need to perform exploratory surgery.” As he spoke, McCord was pushing us out of the way of another resident, who was wheeling in an empty stretcher, and one of the nurses reached to move the curtain so as to let the stretcher pass. “We’ll be moving him to the ready room upstairs in a minute—you two can’t be much help up there.”

“Can we come anyway?” I said. “If we don’t get in the way.”

“Barker’s a very good surgeon,” McCord said—The nurses had begun shifting Douglas onto the stretcher, taking the green blanket and the blood-stained sheet as well. “Your friend has nothing to worry about.”

“Don’t give me that shit,” said Nick. “His blood’s all over the room.”

“But he got here in time— We’ve reversed the hemorrhage. Look”—McCord was lowering his voice and leaning toward us—“It’s none of my business, but you might want to call the police.”

“Nobody did it?” I asked.

“You call the police if there’s a bullet. That’s the rule,” said McCord. “In this case I’m not sure what procedure is—I think you might want to wait until he’s cogent.”

“Nick,” Douglas panted. We looked over and realized that Douglas had turned his head and had fixed his unfocussed eyes on us, shivering as the nurses adjusted his position and began wheeling the stretcher out of the curtained room. “Don’t tell anyone. Don’t tell anyone I fell.”

“Douglas, you’re going to be fine,” said Nick, his voice rough and broken. “We’ll be talking to you soon.”

“Take me home,” Douglas whispered, his eyes closing again.

“Today’s the ninth, isn’t it?” McCord said, fishing in his pocket and producing a square pad of hospital visitor’s passes, quickly scrawling the date on two before tearing them off and giving them to us. “I *think* it’s the ninth. Here—just

put these on. Go through that door and turn left and you'll get to the stairs, and the waiting room is on your left one flight up. You can't miss it."

"It's the tenth," I said, gluing the pass to my lapel. "Thank you, Doctor."

We turned to follow McCord's directions out into another corridor, and had gotten a few feet before Nick stopped, pointing through a doorway at a window that commanded a dim view of the hospital's dark airshaft, and spent a moment photographing the dark limestone walls outside—It didn't look to me like there was enough light but as I remembered there was ample proof that he knew what he was doing. "Listen," he told me as we continued toward the staircase, "I'm sorry I was so bad on the phone—It's just, by then, I was starting to think, you know, that I wasn't going to be able to *reach* anyone—I called Max *Gantry*, Tina Foster, even Jack *Winfield*, and, you know, nothing but a lot of answering machines. Shit, this is depressing—"

"You tried Douglas' family?"

"I think they're out of town," Nick said as I held the stairwell door for him. "The, um, the neighbor, you know, that woman, she doesn't know Douglas at all, she had no idea how to, you know, how to reach them, but when I called I got a message with something about getting back next month. Mike—I just noticed your glasses are gone."

"I've got lenses now," I explained. "How about Annabelle?"

"Yeah—same deal," said Nick, shaking his head. "Her machine doesn't have a message, just some jazz. She's probably out for the evening. I didn't say anything."

"How'd she get *you*?" I asked as we mounted the stairs. "The neighbor, I mean."

"I wondered too," said Nick, his voice echoing harshly against the stairwell's cinderblock walls. "After they took Douglas away, she found my number

in Douglas', you know, in his apartment. She was so relieved that I was actually a friend."

"Jesus— Douglas shouldn't be here," I said, squinting in the stairwell's dim light.

"Sure he should," said Nick, frowning in dismissive confusion as we topped the stairs and moved toward a large steel door. "I'm sure this was the closest—"

"No—It just seems so *wrong*," I explained.

"I know what you mean," said Nick, holding the door for me. "It shook me up, too. Seeing him—I mean that's the *worst*, man, not being safe in your fucking home. I should get some new locks."

We'd entered a small, otherwise-unoccupied waiting room and I put the plastic bag down on the worn carpet while Nick closed the metal door against the cloying smell of alcohol, and we sat awkwardly facing each other on couches, Nick looking at me kindly, his eyebrows protruding above his sunglasses.

"No one's seen you in ages," Nick said.

"I'm still here."

"It would seem so." Nick fiddled uncomfortably with his camera as he looked at me. "What are you up to, anyway? Do you always work so *late*?"

"I've been at a newspaper for a while," I said, taking my jacket off and laying it on the couch, "but the past few months I've been working for this, um, this Suburban Supplement they've got, and the, um, the hours are funny sometimes."

"Did you have a good summer?"

"It was brutal," I said, remembering how I would leave the television on while I sat and read books in the other room, with no air conditioner, the windows open, not wanting to think about why I left the television on, which was for the sound of nearby voices, and that I would pretend my bed was a bed in a ho-

tel, somewhere far away, which somehow made it easier to sleep. I remembered the afternoon with the collegiate woman, the brush of the hot wind late in the day at the river's edge where we had leaned on the wooden guardrail, the ineptly-ordered drinks we'd had later, after putting our sweaters on, and then the shine of her front steps as she turned to ask, keys in hand, if I would make it home all right—The door swung shut and it wasn't long before the days that ended the summer, cleaning out our accounts and polluting our blood. "How'd you track me down, anyway?"

"I've been meaning to call you for a while, actually," Nick said. "It finally occurred to me to check the Brooklyn listings—What are you, living alone?" Nick grinned at me. "You got some babe stashed away over there?"

"I found this cheap place in Carrol Gardens," I said, remembering how to avoid Nick's gibes. "I have to, um, have to get back and forth every day but it's a beautiful neighborhood."

"Yeah, it's supposed to be nice," said Nick, lighting a cigarette with a nightclub matchbook and then looking around fruitlessly for an ashtray. "A newspaper, huh? Does it pay well?"

"Ehh," I said, grimacing. "You know. I get by. How about you, Nick—What are you doing now? Are you still living downtown?"

"Same as it ever was," Nick said, leaning back on the couch, a cloud of fragrant smoke spreading out around him. "I'm logging hours for the carpet company part time—You remember the carpet company?" I nodded. "I'm *working* a lot, though—I sold some stuff a ways back, this little gallery, a couple stints here and there, but that's a tough market, so what I've been doing, I've been trying for a *while*, the last couple years, to get commercial work. My portfolio's good, but landing a magazine's *always* been tricky, you know, with all these funky connections you're supposed to have." Nick inhaled on the cigarette, stubbled

cheeks sucking inward. “Living downtown—yeah, same damn place for six years. I’d move in a *second*, you know, but it’s rent-controlled and right now I’m pretty cash-poor.”

We sat quietly for a moment, Nick tapping ashes on the carpet.

“I think he’s all right, don’t you?” Nick said, leaning forward and scratching his face. “I mean he’s scared shitless, but that guy seemed calm, right? The doctor.”

“I don’t know,” I said, shaking my head. “I’ll feel better when they’re done with him—I couldn’t believe it when he said Thorndike.”

“That was scary,” Nick agreed, looking at his watch. “Listen, you know what just occurred to me? Maybe Annabelle got home from wherever the hell she is. You think we should try to reach her?”

“Well, um, we wouldn’t want to shake her up too much,” I said, concerned.

“Shake her up?” Nick was chuckling disdainfully, corners of his mouth pulled down as he reared back on the couch, rolling his shoulders, dropping the cigarette and smashing it out against the carpet with his foot. “Man, *try* to shake her up. You *can’t* shake her up, buddy—she’s got it *made*.”

“I just meant,” I said, “that we could wait until we got some word on his, you know, on the surgery, on his condition. There’s— You really want to tell her that her brother’s in surgery?”

“You’re right,” said Nick, reaching into his overcoat pocket. “Why don’t you do it?”

“Oh, give me a break, Nick,” I said, pained.

“No, I’m serious,” said Nick, fishing a black leather address book from his back pocket. “I’ve called *enough* answering machines tonight. Come on, buddy—Here’s your big chance to call Annabelle.”

“Nick,” I argued, “I haven’t seen her since high school. I don’t even *know* her. I mean, I’ve, you know, I’ve seen her in *magazines*, but—” Nick grinned privately as he thumbed through the address book. “You—you’re friends with her, right?”

“I’m in *touch* with her. Mike”—he held out the opened book—“You’re a professional type, you know her deal, all I’m asking you to do is make one of these damn calls for me—I’ve been on the phone all night.” I stood up and accepted the address book, stowing it under my arm and absently picking up the green bag of bloody clothes as I started for the door. “I don’t know why you’re carrying that around,” Nick said. “I mean, the Tafts eat new clothes for breakfast.”

“The doctor mentioned the police—”

“What do you think they’ll do—try to lift *prints* off that shit?” Nick lit another cigarette. “Cold trail, man.”

I wandered down the brightly-buffed corridor floor towards a nearby men’s room, and after almost dropping Nick’s address book into a urinal, I rolled up a sleeve and sank my arm into the cold mass of torn and bloody clothes, feeling around at the bottom and finally extracting what seemed to be a pair of gold-plated barber’s scissors—I held the long scissors up to the bright bathroom light, hearing the pattering drops of dried blood dropping from the scissors and tapping the tile floor, and then carefully rinsed and dried them, rolling my sleeves back down and discarding the bag of clothes in a chrome litter basket. I was still holding the gold scissors, carrying them like Kipling’s doomed king as I dropped a dime into a public phone and resignedly punched Annabelle’s number, listening to her line ringing several times before she answered, the faint sound of some clear modern jazz drifting behind her voice, which I realized I remembered very well—As she said hello I imagined I could discern the effects of the passing

years.

“Annabelle Taft, please?” I said hesitantly.

“Speaking.”

“This is Michael Cadenhead.”

“Michael!” said Annabelle after a moment. “This is a surprise.”

“Annabelle, I’m”—I cleared my throat—“I’m at St. Mark’s Hospital, um, with Nick Blanchard. We’re here because— We’re here because your brother’s been in an accident.”

“Wait—” Annabelle sounded more confused than alarmed. “I’m sorry— What do you mean, an accident? What sort of accident?”

“We don’t know yet,” I said, my perspiring fingers slipping on the scissors as I covered my ear against the sound of a doctor being paged. “He was— It looks like he was attacked. Um— He’s got some kind of, some kind of stab wound—They gave him a painkilling drug and took him—”

“Stab— Did you say *stab wound*? Is he all right?” Annabelle asked anxiously. “I mean is he badly hurt? Is he going to be all right?”

“Yes,” I said, pushing my hand through my hair. “I think so.”

“What do you *mean*, you *think* so?” Annabelle’s voice was climbing into a higher register of anxiety, and I heard the music shut off. “Why did you say ‘accident’? I don’t underst— What *happened* to him?”

“All I know is that his neighbor called Nick,” I explained, “and he— And Nick tried to call you *then*, but he couldn’t reach anyone except me. Douglas is in stable condition—I think he had a bad scare but there doesn’t seem to be any question he’ll pull through.”

“All right,” said Annabelle, sighing, calming down a bit. “All right. Christ, you scared me to death, Michael.” I could hear her breathing as she tried to compose herself. “Our parents are overseas. Damn it— Wait, you said Nick *con-*

tacted you? He's there with you now?"

"He's in the waiting room in case there's news. He told me to call you," I continued, awkwardly filling the pause, "and he said I was, um, a professional, that I knew your deal."

"I don't believe it," Annabelle said weakly, and as I waited for her to go on, the scissors slipped out of my dampening hand and clattered loudly to the floor, just missing my foot. "What was that sound?" Annabelle asked sharply.

"I dropped a pair of scissors," I said. "Look, if you come up here now, we might be able to get in to see him—We're waiting for details, but I think he'll be able to—"

"I can't," Annabelle said. "I can't come up there. Listen, what do you do for a living, Michael?"

"I'm a journalist. I don't understand," I said. "Couldn't you just take a cab or something? You're in *Manhattan*—you're not that far away. There's nobody else here, and we'll be—"

"I can't," Annabelle said quickly. "I'm sorry, I can't—Douglas will understand. I've got to go, Michael. I'm sorry." There was a clattering sound and the line went dead, and I hung up the receiver, bending to retrieve the scissors, and headed back toward the waiting room.

"Mike! Get over here," Nick called out as soon as he saw me round the corner. He was standing in the corridor holding our coats and talking to a diminutive woman in her thirties dressed in surgical clothes, her shoes wrapped in plastic, a tight-fitting surgical cap concealing her hair, a mask hanging round her neck. "They're all done," Nick told me as I arrived. "This is Doctor Barker—Tell him what you just told me," he said to the young woman.

"Yes, Doctor?" I said, returning Nick's address book and accepting my jacket, stowing the scissors in its vest pocket. "How is he?"

“Mr. Taft has suffered only mild intestinal abrasions,” Barker told me in a bland, pleasant voice. “The principal damage was confined to muscle tissue, which should heal quite nicely.”

“Thank God, right?” Nick said, staring at me.

“Could we—” I stopped to clear my throat. “Would it, um, would it be all right for us to see him?”

Barker was shaking her head. “It shouldn’t be a problem, but I’d recommend against discussing the injury,” she said, beginning to lead us away. “He’s left the recovery room— You can just follow me.”

“Will he be, um, staying at the hospital?” I asked as we began walking.

“I think just tonight—He’s groggy from the codeine, but he only required a local anesthetic so his convalescence should be relatively brief,” Barker said, leading us through swinging steel doors into a harshly-lit corridor, past bright, clean rooms filled with complex equipment. “I don’t know how fully Dr. McCord explained things to you but in cases like these surgery is essentially a precautionary measure.”

“I talked to Annabelle,” I told Nick.

“Good for you,” Nick said, not looking at me. “Listen, Doctor, ‘precautionary’— What does that mean?”

“Necessary only so as to ascertain the extent of the internal damage,” Barker recited smoothly, looking at us. “Are you all he’s got?”

“I’m sorry?” I said, my voice blurred by fatigue and strain.

“He doesn’t have a family?” asked Barker. “Your friend.”

“They’re travelling,” I said. “They’re wealthy people. He’s alone.”

“That’s a shame,” said Barker, turning so as to include Nick in her commentary. “You must be good friends of his then—I should have come right out when you got here.”

“You had better things to do,” I said. “Please don’t worry about it.”

“Well, procedural considerations still can blind us. Look, nobody can lay bets on the results of even a mild abdominal wound,” Barker said. “As it is, your friend was very lucky—he had a frightening experience, but Dr. Gonzalez and I had a simple procedure to perform and the operation was absolutely uneventful. Are you all right?”

She had brought us to a well-made wooden door, and as we stood in a rough circle I realized that she was looking at me critically. “What— Me?” I asked, startled.

“You look awful.” Dr. Barker raised her eyebrows at me as she scratched her forehead along the furled elastic edge of her surgical cap, and Nick gazed at us expressionlessly, his sunglasses reflecting square images of the overhead lights. “Don’t strain him too hard—he’s very sleepy,” she told us, smiling as she gestured towards the door and moved to leave. “If you could keep it to just a few minutes, I’m sure he’d be grateful.”

“Thank you,” Nick said hoarsely, returning her smile.

“Look—Here’s my extension number,” Barker said suddenly, finshing in a cluttered breast pocket for a business card. “If there’s anything I can help you with, feel free to call—I can be reached late into the night.”

We slowly stepped into a small, warm, windowless room, lit only by a dim fluorescent tube mounted behind a recessed wall panel, and as my eyes adjusted to the darkness I made out two complicated hospital beds, each flanked by a padded chair. Douglas lay sleeping in the front bed, his soft hospital-issue cotton pajamas unbuttoned to reveal the thick white edge of a large, clean bandage—He still had the particular seersucker look that I remembered, his pretty face tanned and smooth and his hair across his forehead—In a hospital bed he conveyed wounded wealth more than anything else. Nick and I looked at each

other and stepped forward, and as Nick finally removed his sunglasses and then carried the other bed's chair over and we sat down side by side, our chairs scraping on the polished floor, Douglas stirred, opening his eyes slightly and then turning his head, looking at us for a moment and then beginning to smile.

"You're really here, Nick," Douglas said, his voice quiet and soft, his breathing regular. "I thought that was a dream."

"I'm here," Nick said quietly, stowing his sunglasses in his overcoat pocket, smiling at Douglas, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"Michael?" Douglas murmured, looking at me, his head moving with profound fatigue, eyes slowly focusing. "Michael, is that *you*? It's been— It's been a long time."

"Hello, Douglas," I said. "It's good to see you."

"I can't believe you're here. I didn't"—his breathing hitched and he winced, closing his eyes, before continuing—"I didn't think anyone was coming."

"Of course we're here," Nick said.

"How do you feel?" I asked.

"Tired," Douglas said. "A little bit nauseous." He opened his eyes. "I've got such a stomachache," he said more quietly, eyes drifting back to us.

"You've got a new bracelet," I said, pointing.

"Yeah," Douglas whispered, keeping his movements to a minimum, his breathing regular but slow. "But they took everything else. I think they sold my watch, but it's been"—his voice hitched again—"falling apart since graduation anyway."

"Your watch is here," Nick said, pointing down at the bedside cabinet, where a Cartier tank watch had been placed on edge, its bracelet and onyx-inlaid crown reflecting the dim light, and as I glanced at the wristwatch I noticed that

its crystal was broken by a long vertical crack. “All you’re stuff’s safe—Nobody ripped you off.”

“Nick, you bum,” whispered Douglas, beginning to cry gently. “I can’t believe you’re here—I didn’t think anyone was going to come. I don’t even know—I don’t even know how long I’ve been here.” He cried without tightening his face, tears gently rolling across his cheekbones, brown eyes closing, and Nick put his hand back on Douglas’ shoulder.

“Of course we’re here,” I said.

“I thought I was all alone,” Douglas whispered, brimming eyes closed. “I didn’t know where I was and I dreamed about falling.” Douglas sniffed and then moved his arm sluggishly to wipe his eyes. “I dreamed I was dying.”

“Take it easy, Doug,” said Nick after a moment. “Take it easy.”

“I’m okay,” Douglas whispered, sniffing again, rubbing his nose with the back of his wrist, sluggishly turning his head back toward us. “Mike, it’s good to see you,” he said, smiling. “What are you doing these days? How’d you—How’d you know to come?”

“I’m writing for a newspaper,” I said. “Nick tracked me down.”

“A newspaper. That’s good,” said Douglas softly. “That’s good.”

“Is there anything you want?” I asked. “Anyone you want us to call?”

Douglas looked at me, still wiping the tears from his face. “No,” he said. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Should we call the police?” Nick asked.

“Oh, no, that’s— Please, please don’t do that,” Douglas said. “Please don’t talk.”

“Are you sure?” I said, frowning. “We could contact Annabelle.”

“No, don’t bother her,” said Douglas, settling back and staring up at the ceiling, tired eyes drifting closed again, voice falling toward sleep. “Do me one

favor—call where I work. It’s the Lineage Institute, you can just call the WATS line”—he gave a phone number—“and tell them I won’t be in for a while. Say I’m taking some, um, sick leave.”

“I’ll do that,” said Nick, producing his address book and a ball point pen. “Any particular person?”

“Carol Casey.” Douglas breathed heavily, in and out, his bandaged waist rising and falling. “Sweet Carol. Don’t forget, Nick.”

“I’m writing it down,” said Nick, doing so. “How about Max Gantry?”

“I haven’t seen Max in a long time,” Douglas whispered, his eyes closed. “He’s building an airplane, right?”

“What?” I said, glancing at Nick.

“That didn’t make sense, did it?” Douglas whispered, his hand drifting over to the bandage around his stomach. “I’m sorry. It must be the codeine.”

“You probably ought to leave that alone,” said Nick. “You’re sure you’re feeling all right?”

“Yeah. I mentioned the stomachache,” Douglas said, chuckling mildly and wincing, pushing air through his chapped lips like a failing athlete. “The doctor explained about the sutures.”

“She told us you’re going to be fine,” Nick said in a scratched voice. “You just need some rest now.”

“Okay,” whispered Douglas. “Just rest.”

Douglas seemed to be falling back asleep, and Nick and I looked at each other, agreeing by a glance that we should leave. “Sleep well, buddy,” Nick said, smiling and patting Douglas lightly on the cheek with the fingers of his open hand. We stood as quietly as possible, Nick unfolding his sunglasses as I put my corduroy jacket on.

“Mike,” Douglas whispered, almost asleep.

“Yeah?” I said, bending down to hear him.

“I’m sorry,” Douglas whispered. “I’m sorry about this.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said, patting his shoulder awkwardly.

“This God damned job. I wish I could—”

“Try to sleep, Douglas.”

“—tell somebody what those fuckers did to me. I’m not afraid,” Douglas whispered, eyes peacefully closed. “I’ll remember you came.”

We made to leave, but at the door Nick stopped and turned back, raising his camera and taking a picture of Douglas sleeping, the curtained bed behind him, the empty chairs facing him. When he was finished I reached to turn the light out and we left the room, finding our way back along the bright corridors, and soon we were stepping through glass doors to where the street was dark and cool and filled with the sounds of city nights.

“Jesus,” I said eventually.

“Some night, huh?” said Nick.

“It’s funny that he mentioned graduation,” I said, hunching against the wind as we walked. “I think that might have been the last time I saw you, Nick.”

“You may be right,” said Nick, looking at me, pulling his cigarettes from his coat.

“You remember when we had those drinks at the hotel that day?” I asked, swerving around a passerby as we walked, feeling the cold evening wind beneath my jacket.

“Yeah,” said Nick distantly, nodding as he remembered. “That was one hell of a weekend.” As the gusting wind furred against my jacket I felt something cold brush my chest and remembered the gold scissors. “You still come up in conversation, you know,” Nick said. “I was talking to Tina Foster a while back, and she said, you know, I wonder what Mike’s doing.”

“Really?” I said, smiling.

We stood near the hospital hunched in our coats, our voices broken by the rising night wind.

“The summer’s over,” said Nick.

“Yeah.”

“It’s going to be a cold autumn,” he added, taillights shining in his sunglasses like campfire sparks. “I’m in the Manhattan book—Call me sometime, you know, and we can go do something.”

“You taking the subway?” I asked.

“I’m cabbing it,” said Nick, already a few steps away, eyes already scanning the empty street.

“All right,” I said. “I’ve missed you, Nick.”

Nick smiled. “It was good to see you, buddy.”

“Well, good night,” I said, waving and turning away into the wind.

A year has now passed since that September but I remember how the collegiate woman had said goodbye to me at the newspaper, and how I hadn’t told her that as we’d stood on her sublet doorstep by the flat edge of Brooklyn Heights with the towers of Manhattan shining across the river on that clear summer night there had been something crucial for me to say, something imperative, and I could keep from speaking only in the panicked knowledge that after her there was no one else. I still remember everything that happened the night of the hospital visit—A woman in a drab winter coat sat next to me on the empty subway, skimming a fashion magazine, and when I got home my possessions looked like nothing at all—The typewriter and baled newspapers were cheap acquaintances, fragile wreckage draped over the hard edges of Nick’s voice and Douglas’ blood and the lovely stare that Annabelle reserved for the camera lens.

