

You wake up in a hospital bed. Wires attached to your arms, a breathing apparatus in your nose. Everything is white and hard and loud. You don't remember a thing about how you got here. The only reality you know is that you're here. Faces appear in front of you, quizzical and stern and sometimes confused or sad, but none of them are the least bit familiar. You wonder if you're in some different city, different state—different country? The only problem is that you can't remember where you were originally from, where you're supposed to be.

And you try *hard* to remember. Time passes and the machines whir and click and goddamn it, you try.

But nothing comes.

You can see a small sliver of a window to your left, far away, and that's how you begin to gauge the time of day it is—sometimes it's a bright blue sky and other times it's an orangey-pink afterglow of the sun sinking. You lie there for days. It becomes a test of endurance. You don't feel much pain at first; it's all very numb, but then as the days go on you start to notice it more. You want to tell the nurse who comes by to stop putting morphine in your IV drip. The pain, you think, could hold its own secrets, could tell you who you are.

Mostly you just want to feel something. With the morphine, that isn't an option.

Eventually, after a long string of empty days lying in bed alone, they sit your bed up.

Across from you is a man with a trimmed mustache, wearing white. He's bald and has warm eyes. He tells you you've been in a horrific accident, and you're at the Florida Hospital. Your car was wrecked beyond repair, and you were found there in the ruins, the doctor says. Someone in a black SUV ran a red light and smashed headlong into you. You have four broken bones in one leg and three in the other, and both of your arms are broken, too. Your collarbone has been fractured. It's a miracle, the doctor says, that none of your internal organs were hit.

You say, that's the miracle of a good, strong car. You've got to have your humor – it's the only way to deal with any of this.

A nurse brings you a cup of ice water. It's cool going down. You feel a bit better after you drink some.

You ask the doctor, what happened to the man who hit me? Was he arrested?

The doctor says he was hurt, too, and is being treated in the same hospital. The doctor says he'll be charged with reckless driving. He may have had alcohol in his system – the tests will be back soon, maybe today.

You ask if the doctor can tell you when the charges come down. He looks a bit taken aback, but nods; says he'll let you know if he can.

You feel a flickering flame in you that wants to see someone pay for this. This feeling is much brighter and more intense than anything else right now. It shines through the haze of the morphine like the sun through the clouds.

For some reason, his face doesn't register right with your brain. You sit and you talk with him just fine, but it's like there's a smudge over your vision when you try to remember his face. Like it's someone you haven't seen in three years and you're trying to recall their face to find them in a crowd. Only the doctor is across from you right now.

You shrug it off. It's just the morphine, you tell yourself. It's the weariness from the accident. You can't remember anything about your personal life, either – not your wife or your kids, though you thumb through the wallet they found on you at the accident and try to remember who all of these people are. A blonde woman, smiling, pretty even with the lines on her face. Two kids, a boy and a girl, both right on the edge of adolescence. But you can't remember their names or any specific memories – just hazy, blurred images, fading into some dark distance.

That dark distance – with its dim orange horizon and seemingly bottomless depths and echos of sounds that sounded like crying – is terrifying to you. It's not something you connect with the rest of the world around you, but it's there, real as the sun outside, just in your mind like a deep chasm where the memories seem to have gone.

The next day, a woman sits in the chair by your bed. She looks solemn, hands folded in her lap, pretty despite the lines creasing her cheeks and chin. Her name is Melissa, you know because her name was on some of the forms they had to fill out while you were comatose. And it was written on the back of the picture. All of your names are written in a woman's cursive – Evan, Melissa, Aidan, Evelyn.

She calls you by your name, says it like it's an arcane incantation, says “Evan.”

“Evan,” you say.

She says, “They tell me you're having trouble remembering.”

“Yes,” you say, “a bit.” You're not sure why you lie and downplay it. It's much more than a bit of memory you've lost. You can't remember a goddamned thing. Stone cold gone, all of it; wiped like a computer with a virus.

She nods. “The kids wanted to be here after they heard you woke up. They're coming by tonight, though. I told them to bring some dinner.”

You nod. You hear her words, but something's distracting you. It's her face, you realize. Like the doctor, you don't think you could pick her face out of a crowd. You study all the details of her face, and you know from the picture that you've been with her a long time – this is your wife, and you can't

recognize her.

She notices you staring. She asks if something's wrong and you tell her no. She reaches over and touches your arm, and it feels nice. Maybe that's the key, you think – a familiar touch, spending time with your family, the remembrance of the moments that were so special to the rest of them but to you are now so alien.

She steps out to get you some things from the store – the newspapers you read, she says. She says she'll stop at home and pick up your laptop so you can watch movies and check the Internet while you're in the hospital.

“Thank you, honey,” you say, trying out the words. They do not sound familiar. Everything is strange. As she goes, even the sunlight on the back of her head seems strange, though you can't say why. You hate the strange, chaotic maelstrom your mind has become. In your bed, you clench your good fist open and closed over and over, letting your nails dig into the soft flesh of your palm...

When the doctor comes in before the lights go out – you at least know the doctor, as he's wearing white and holding a stethoscope – you tell him all these things, about your loss of memory (which they already knew some of) and more disturbingly, the fact that you apparently can't even remember faces. The doctor's face contorts into something like concern. You can't tell if he's the same doctor as before, but you assume so because they wouldn't just keep sending in different guys.

He tells you he'll get someone in to talk to you. Someone with a specialty.

Your kids come and visit you that evening as the sun is sinking outside the window. Your wife is there, too, and you sit there and you eat takeout together. Your son, Aidan, tells you he's working an internship at a podiatrist's office. Your daughter, Evelyn, is working as an apprentice in a glassmaker's shop.

Glassmaking? you ask.

Yeah, she says – glassmaking. She's been interested for a while. She says, I'll bring you one of my sculptures, and you can put it by your bed.

That'd be wonderful, you say.

Aidan has an impish grin when he asks, did you forget about the 'F' he got in school last semester? Because if so, that memory can *stay* forgotten, he says.

You say, when I remember, I'll give you a whuppin', boy. You better hope I don't remember.

Their laughter, along with yours, fills the room, and it's a nice sound, you think. It's almost enough to distract you from immediately after, when Evelyn goes to get a Coke from the machine

down the hall, and when she comes back, it takes you a moment to recognize her. Even when your brain knows it's her, it also takes a moment to register the face.

You stop yourself from crying. No; that waits until after they leave.

The man with the crazy eyes is sitting at your bedside when you wake up in the night, from a restless sleep. His face is cast in shadow, but you can hear his breathing, fast and shallow, and you can see his wild, big white eyes with the pupils that always seem to be moving. He's got his head resting on one thin, spindly hand. When he sees you awake, he sits up straighter. He's wearing dark, inconspicuous clothing. When he speaks, it's in a high, raspy voice, and what he says sends a chill down your spine.

Those people you think are your family, he says, they're not. They're fakers.

Why should I believe you? you ask. You wish to God you could move right now, if not for all the wires you're hooked to and all your broken bones.

Because I'm your only friend, Evan, he says, and somehow his eyes get even wider, even whiter. You're an important guy. They don't like that you lived through the accident, but this memory loss and the face thing? Saved your ass for now.

Saved me from what? you ask. You tell me right fucking now, man, or I'll call security. You try to sound convincing, immobilized in your hospital bed, but it's difficult.

You and me, he says, we were members of the same insurance place, right? A month ago, we found some incriminating documents about some powerful people in this city. Criminal, serious shit – could have put the mayor and a bunch of his staffers in jail, ya know. You were gonna go to the press with it, blow the whole thing wide.

Why didn't I?

Because you ended up here, he says, spreading his hands wide in a dramatic gesture.

Your mouth is dry. The room is dark and goddamn it, it feels small now, small and claustrophobic, and you can't breathe so well. You try to remember any of what he's saying, but nothing comes.

The guy tells you the documents were tax cheats, scandals on a massive scale, evidence of mafia ties and unethical loans from private businesses. There was a whole litany, he says. He says they staged the crash and hoped you would have died. But he says the documents weren't anywhere on you when they pulled you out.

So where are they? he asks.

Your mouth is dry again and you say you don't know. You try to remember but nothing comes.

It's lost in the great dark distance in your mind.

A rotund, mustachioed man in red comes to see you. He says he is a neuroscientist and they're going to scan your brain. They wheel you down the hall. It's strange to have no control at all over your movement, to be wheeled around like property. They move you onto another stretcher and put you into a large, cylindrical tunnel with beeps and whirs and lights – and all the while you're surrounded by faces you can't tell apart, just a sea of interchangeable, stoic face-masks, and you remember what the man told you last night and you feel the greatest fear you have ever known – for what are they doing to you? Are they preying upon you even now?

Prosopagnosia, they tell you – that's what you have now. Face blindness, for the layman. Your brain was damaged in the crash, they say. Now, you can't remember faces. Every face, even those of your loved ones, could be any stranger's in a crowd. They say it's most likely never going to get better. They tell you most people who have it get around it by paying attention to other things – to clothing styles, hair styles, voices, body movements...

At least you're not insane, you think.

The head of security comes in after and tells you they caught a man loitering outside your room last night, and on the cameras they saw him talking to you. He is a large, stout man with a round belly and a mean face. His hands are on his waist and he fills the whole doorway, casting a long shadow over your bed. He says they took care of the man and he is in jail now.

He was a friend, you say, although you're not entirely sure – but it seems important, and you want more information from the man you spoke to in the night. You want him to come back.

Well, all visitors have to be cleared by the front desk, he says. Your friend wasn't.

He has a tone that says he doesn't want to talk or debate. That's the final word.

A tall, broad-shouldered young man, strapping and deep-voiced, sits in the chair by your bed sometime later that afternoon. Your head is full of morphine, everything is fuzzy, but you think he might be the one who said he was your son. He says hello and it sounds slowed down, thick and fuzzy in your addled brain. His face could be anyone's face. He looks like he could be your son or a random man on the streets. This breaks your heart, because somewhere deep in you, intrinsically, family is important.

He brings takeout Chinese and you eat together while watching baseball on TV. You laugh with him a bit and you joke about the players who used steroids, and you talk about your picks for who should be on which team in the next season. He's also snuck in a six pack of beer. So you drink with

your son. You're surprised how much you genuinely enjoy his company. It would be a shame, you think, if he turned out to be a fake, as the man with the wild eyes in the night told you.

Aidan talks to you about his work as the game is winding down. He says he feels like he's onto something with the internship at the podiatrist's office. He says being a doctor would be rewarding. He's been searching most of his life for the job he could get that would pay well *and* offer him the chance to help the world, to make some difference.

You say, with the beer fuzzy on your tongue, that you hope he succeeds.

You muster the ghost of a smile, weak and pale, and you say you'll try. You're starting to think now that he might be your son. You get some vague recollections of a former life. Images filter in, hazy and bright, as if ghostly pictures in a dream. You remember pulling two delighted, screaming children in a blue wagon. You remember picnics at sunset, sandwiches with the corners cut off, Ritz crackers spilling out of their containers, cold beer and fruit punch, kids shoving and playing around with one another, your wife's hand on your shoulder.

But then the young man sitting across from you says this: Do you remember anything else? How's your memory doing?

He sounds innocuous enough – but there's a queer desperation, like a salivating dog for water, that puts you off. If he were your son, you think there'd be more of a longing, loving voice. Not the barely-contained lust for knowledge, like a vulture circling a desert corpse.

No, you force yourself to say; nothing.

After the man calling himself your son leaves, you feel the claustrophobia again like when you were under their machines, under their white prying lights – under their *control*. When the nurses and orderlies go by outside, you look as far as you can with the bandages and casts around your neck and shoulders, straining to try and see and recognize them. But it's no use. With the face-blindness, none of them look immediately familiar. You'd have to hear their voices, you think, to know that they aren't impostors wearing uniforms, wielding syringes with truth-telling serums or who knows what else...

Maybe that stuff is just in the comic books, you think. Maybe nothing bad will happen.

The worst thing – and also, bitterly, the best – is that your memory has begun to return.

You remember your wife as a plain-faced woman, warm of heart, good at baking, and who always supported you, and you always supported her. It was an equal partnership. You took her for dates on nights you could get a babysitter. You remember her laugh – a sonorous, melodious sound that would warm your heart. You remember the books she read – trashy romance novels for the most part,

until she got it in her to pick up something like a Fitzgerald novel from the library, a callback to her once-upon-a-time past as an English major, from days when she had limitless time to read and absorb literary, meaningful things.

You remember the weary look she had when the kids would do such stupid things or when something awful would come on the news – a look that said *I'm tired, but we're in this together*.

We're in this together.

You wish you could see her now. But she's nowhere to be found.

You also remember snippets of your life as an insurance auditor; a life of going to businesses and asking them why they hadn't paid their taxes, a life where everyone hated you and you got to relish in that, in a perverse way. You remember going to flower shops and mechanic shops and even peoples' homes and milling through their taxes and laying down the iron fist of the law. The day you found the dirt on the mayor and other city officials, it was a cloudy day and you were knee-deep in reports. You started seeing the names and the connecting dots and you realized the numbers didn't add up.

When your boss took you off the job, that was when things started seeming strange – when he called you in and told you you were being put on something else; a construction firm clear on the other side of town, on the edge of the county. You asked why and your boss, who was a bald man with a stern face, told you because they needed it done, but there was such a strange glint in his eyes.

And the papers, burning in your passenger's car seat, waiting to be unveiled to the world. You and a co-worker, whose name you think was Jeff, started making plans to go to the press with the documents, and this is where things start to get a bit fuzzy. You remember taking the documents...somewhere, but you can't remember where. You remember a chorus of agitated voices, a phone call made in urgency, the sound of squealing tires, the smell of burning rubber and metal...

And then nothing.

You spend the next day looking up articles about the mayor. He comes across as a firm, no-nonsense type, and his grin reminds you of a shark. He speaks with a boastful bravado and apparently rarely gives interviews or lets anyone ask him questions. You can only vaguely recall the things in the documents you found on him, but you know there were some ties to organized crime and accusations of funneling taxpayer money into dubious-sounding companies. Maybe you never got the chance to read them in full.

Either way, you want justice now. You feel it burning in you.

A woman visits you in the dead of night, slender and auburn-haired, with a voice smooth and silky, wearing all black. She leans close and you can smell her perfume – something like lilacs. She

asks you if you remember where the documents are. Her voice is hushed and urgent. She seems scared to you. You can't remember if you know this woman, so you ask who she is.

My name is Melissa, she says. We worked together at the insurance company. I quit after your accident – I was so afraid.

Afraid? you ask.

Yes, she says, of what they'd do to me if they found out I knew about the documents too. Jeff told me before your accident, and after the crash, we all went underground.

I see, you say.

“Do you remember where they are?” she asks. “If we find out, we can put an end to all this.”

You shake your head the best you can, again restricted by the casts and the bandages. No, you say, I can't remember. I'm trying to remember, but it isn't coming.

She nods and you feel her patting your shoulder. Her hands are soft and gentle, and when you look over, she has a pitying look on her face – like a mother with a sick child. She says, Just be careful, and then she gets up.

“You're going?” you ask, and you're surprised by how much you don't want her to leave; how much you missed a woman's touch and lilac-scent. Most of all, you just want answers, and you think this woman could be the one to give them to you.

I can't be seen here, she says. Too risky. I have to go before they find me.

And she's just gone, like a ghost. You stare at your empty room and you feel something pressing on your chest – something immaterial and great and dark. The dark distance in your mind glows a macabre orange. There's something you're right on the edge of, and you want to find out but at the same time, you're deathly afraid.

The next morning, the headlining story in the paper they bring you is a man found dead in a parking lot behind a 7/11. He's described as skinny and with dark hair and dark clothes. The cause of death is a gunshot wound to the back of the head – execution style, you think grimly; recalling old Martin Scorsese films and pulp fiction novels. You stare at the picture. He looks familiar – the slick dark hair and the clothes seem like they were the same as the first man who came to you in the night; who the security guard said had been arrested.

You feel something churning in your gut.

The nurse who brings you your pills for the day smells like lilacs. Under her hat, she has auburn hair, and her voice sounds too much like that of the woman who visited you in the night. You can't recognize the face, but nothing else about this is good. You try to tell yourself it's just paranoia, the way

she's looking at you out of the corner of her eye as she leaves the room, just the hint of a sly knowing grin on her face...

The dream comes like a bullet in the night, and when you wake, you remember where the documents are. In your dream you were driving to a safe place. One of those storage lockers, you realize, with rows and rows of interchangeable, industrial-size garage doors that you can buy space at. You distinctly remember this happening for real – you rented a locker and took the documents there, stored them in an old dresser you found at a cheap garage sale a few blocks from there. You locked up the storage locker and hid the key.

But where?

You remember your old car – a beat up old Sedan the color of ash, from a time before the Internet was a thing. It was totaled in the crash, they said – they showed you a picture and you saw it crumpled like an aluminum foil wrapper thrown in the trash, barely recognizable as the old warhorse of a car that got you from Point A to Point B since you were in your late 20s and just married, kid on the way. You felt a certain poignancy then. A passing of the torch.

The key was in your car. Your car, which has been demolished by now, useless and totaled.

For the next two months, you do your physical therapy. The bones and the muscles mend even through your screaming pain. You relish the end of the day when you can hobble back to your bed and rest with that feeling like an oasis washing over you – deep and cool, soothing your parched and tattered flesh.

After a while, though, the pain eases. You get used to the walking and the stretching and the bending, and you like it. Being confined to the bed, immobilized, starts to seem less and less appealing, and the restlessness from when you were younger returns like a rush of fire. The therapy sessions get easier. You scream less. Your trainer is more relaxed and tells you, with a genuine appreciation, that you've come a long way. Soon enough you are walking on your own. There's a limp in your steps now and your knee is still slow like a rusted door hinge, but the doctor says that will be the worst of it.

The day you're released, it's six months since you woke up. It's a crisp autumn day, the cool wind making you want to sip hot chocolate and read in the park.

You're picked up by a pretty woman with straw-colored hair who calls herself your daughter. She apologizes, says she got a haircut and that's why you might not have recognized her.

You flash back to that night when the stranger sat beside your bed, telling you your family wasn't your family, that they were liars. The woman calling herself your daughter looks to be about 25.

You're 52, you know from the driver's license they showed you, pulled frayed and burnt from the rubble of your car. It's feasible she could be your daughter. And she looks like the woman who said she was your wife.

You get in the car with her. An air freshener in the shape of a tree hangs from her mirror, smells like lilacs, which brings you back to the woman who came to you in the hospital at night, rather uneasily. She's got a bunch of crumpled receipts in her cupholders as well as a work I.D. When you open the passenger's door she stops you to move aside the papers in the front seat. There's a to-go bag for a local indie coffee shop at your feet and it crinkles when your heavy boot hits it. She smiles at you apologetically, says sorry for the mess, says it's been a busy week.

She asks if you're ready to go back to work. You say, soon, probably, though it hasn't crossed your mind much at all. She tells you about her glassmaking class, says she's learning this week how to sculpt faces. She says she very much wants to make one that looks like Robert Downey Jr. You barely hear her, and she doesn't seem to care that you're not listening.

She takes you to a house with two stories and a rose garden out front, says this was the house you raised her in. You have vague memories of a house, but you're not sure it's this one. She sees the look of confusion on your face, says it's been remodeled, has such a placating look on her face, like she's pleading you to believe her. You don't know what to believe.

Your wife works all day at a local florist's shop, so you have the house to yourself for the bulk of the day. You've been told to give it another few weeks before you try doing anything strenuous. Just to make sure, they said. In the mornings, your wife makes you breakfast and you talk at the table. You're careful with your words; you don't tell her any of the memories you've recovered, just in case – the paranoia lingers in your brain like a stranger, just out of sight but in the corner of your eye. She smiles and is attentive to what you say. If she's really a mole, she's awfully patient.

One morning, you tell her you'll wash the dishes; just a courteous gesture. She has to leave for work soon, after all. As you're scrubbing your plate clean you see her through the small window in the door, talking on the phone – it's unusual for her because she never has to talk on the phone before going into the florist's shop, and it looks like she's in the middle of a very secretive and intensive conversation. And does she keep looking back at you through the door, or is it your imagination?

You turn away, keep scrubbing your dishes.

She comes back in and there's the faintest hint of irritation in her gentle smile, in her words when she says, You have a good day today, honey. Keep getting better.

You say, Thank you, but inside you feel the dread bubbling up like an active volcano.

Outside it's cold and gray, the tendrils of winter creeping up fast now. You wrap your coat around yourself. Your newly mended bones ache terribly, but you make it to the taxi and tell him where you're going. The streets of this town you've known for most of your life, but which seems curiously new and infantile now that you've had your months-long stay in the hospital, pass by like a panorama – fast food restaurants, bars, retail outfits the same on every corner, a few local food stands, a few walk-in clinics.

Then it's right there – the storage lockers where you bought the documents that started this whole mess.

The taxi pulls in, and you open the door and pay the driver, tell him to wait for you, you'll only be five minutes. Then, with your aching limbs and your memory like a puzzle without all its pieces, you hobble into the main office. You tell the cashier, a middle-aged guy with a bald spot and skin the color of coffee left out in the sun, that you're here to get your things out of a locker, but you don't have the key. You tell him you were in an accident months ago and lost the key. His eyes are full of sympathy. You realize you've forgotten what that looks like, in the midst of all this conspiracy around you. He leads you to the locker. It's a big, industrial looking thing and the door opens with a loud, rusty creak.

Inside, there's a big old oak dresser that looks like it could have been from the 1930s. The guy with you asks if you need help moving in. You shake your head no, say you're just here to get something inside of it. He nods his head and says if you need him he's in the office nearby, and you thank him and he leaves.

You approach the dresser with trembling hands, feeling as if this is the key to some other life. You feel outside yourself. This has hung over you for months like a pall. In the hospital, a man ended up dying to tell you about this. There's some sense, also, that whatever is inside the dresser is some kind of clue to getting rid of that great dark distance in your mind – that sepulchral, orange glow.

You open the drawer.

Inside, there's a manila folder, and you pick it up and open it.

The papers inside are full of information. You feel a kind of power in your hands, but it isn't real power, isn't *tangible* power. When you get back home, the gun that you bought two weeks ago is still buried beneath your socks. Of course they didn't look very hard for things like this. They only care about one thing, you think, and you have it in a folder on your bed right now.

That evening, your wife doesn't come home from work. She doesn't call. The house is still like a

giant corpse. You sit in your chair with a beer on the table beside you. The papers are in the center of the table. The gun in your lap is heavy and you feel every inch of it. The TV is on but the volume is low. You want to hear everything. Every creak of the old wood stairs and every muffled stereo-music sound from a passing car outside alerts you.

Because you know they're watching. All this time, they have been. Now, you have the papers they wanted so badly. They've manipulated you for months now. They're coming. You sip at your beer and it's frothy and cool and chills your nerves enough to be ready. Maybe you shouldn't be drinking, you think, but fuck it, this will all be over soon, and your nerves are on fire.

When the man comes in, your body tenses up. He's pointing a gun at you. He's a big guy, with broad shoulders, and he's wearing all black. He looks at you not with rage or malice but with the hard, deadened eyes of a man doing a job. When he speaks, his voice has a familiar tinge to it, and you know that it's the same man who sat beside your bed and called himself your son in the hospital; who asked you if you remembered anything with that twinge of greed and lust in his face.

If you needed any further confirmation that none of it has been real since you woke up – well, you have it now.

It'll look like a home invasion, he's saying, with a relaxed demeanor that tells you he's done this several times.

What do you get out of this? you ask. What, really?

Nothing, he says. It's just business. Can't have anyone seeing what's in that folder you got there.

You resign yourself to this. Something passes before your eyes. Not memories of a life you're losing – that was all gone with the crash. Now, you just get the ephemeral, powerful pull toward the grave and you don't want to go. You tighten your hand around the gun in your lap.

Do you really think you can shoot me first? the man asks.

Maybe, you say. I have more to lose.

The man shrugs. I would beg to differ on that, he says. Smug and self-confident, the gun before him unwavering. If he shot now, he knows exactly where he'd hit. You don't have much time left. He's inching his body closer to the table, with the folder on top of it. His hand is reaching out, with the index finger of his other hand on the trigger of the gun...

You close your eyes and pull the trigger on your gun. The boom sounds and echoes off the walls in this rickety old house, and when you open your eyes, he's on the floor and bleeding.

The folder lies on the table.

You sit there in the dark for a few quiet moments, punctuated only by the man's dying gasps on the floor, and think about how much blood has been shed over a few pieces of paper. The man on the

floor dies a few moments later. With shaking hands you call the cops. The dead man on the floor will be taken away, and the powerful politicians whose names are in the folder will be brought down. There's going to be a big change-up in this city.

You don't know exactly when you fall asleep, but it comes hard and fast and you welcome it.

After some time, you wake up to the sound of footsteps, and your brain jolts awake faster than lightning. The house is dark and the gun's sitting in your lap, and you position the gun in front of you, holding it with feeble, shaking hands. Everything is harsh and hard and too bright. Your stomach rumbles and you don't know how long it's been since you ate. The door is open and they're pouring in. They're making too much noise to be mafia guys, and you think there are too many – at least half a dozen, and all wearing official-looking suits with gold badges.

One of them is speaking to you in an earnest, clear voice. He's flashing his badge. Sir, he's saying; sir, can you understand me? What's happened here?

You can see the body of your would-be assailant on the floor a few feet away. They're zipping him up in a bag.

You look up at the face of the man talking to you, and you know you can't recognize him even if you did know him, but you decide you have to trust someone. This whole thing, you decide, has gone far enough. So you gesture with your hand to the manila folder on the table beside you.

And when the man picks it up and begins to leaf through it, his face is stoic at first. But after a few pages his eyes widen and he says, Holy shit, and he calls a buddy over. Then they're all leafing through it. Some of them, between glances, look at you with incredulity. The energy in the room becomes electric. You feel a kind of lightening of a great burden. The voices around you become a whirlwind and you let it wash over you.