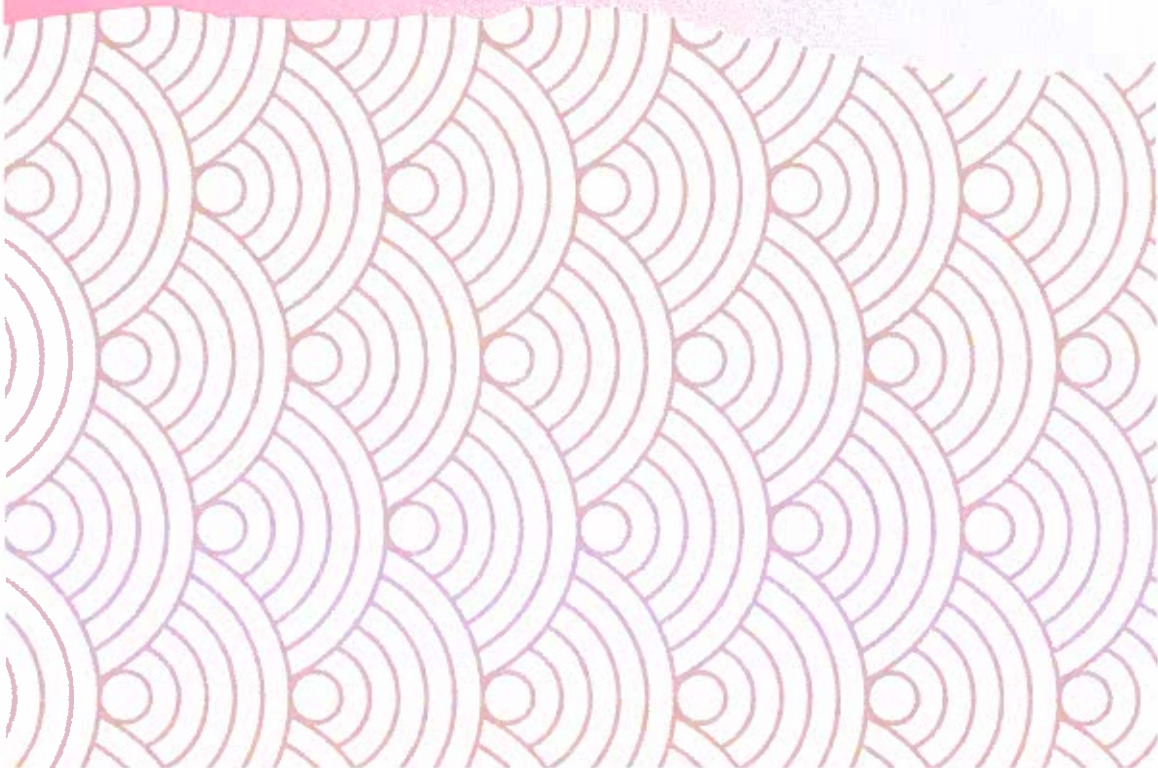




Exit Interview



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Lying here in the hospital, badly shaken, I've been looking out onto the lights of the City. I can't tell if the windows are streaked with mist or a light rain, or if it's just my eyes. Please excuse me, let me collect myself here. There. That's better. Great absorbency these hospital gown sleeves, huh? You know a two-hour interview with an angry and determined SWAT commander can do that to you. Make you not sure of how you're feeling. Of course, though, he was helpful at filling me in on the parts of today's activities I didn't witness firsthand. The ones you said were on the evening news. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me start at the beginning. Talking out loud about today to someone such as yourself who wasn't there might help me figure out what I'm going to do. Here, pull up a chair, there's no one in the next bed. The nurses won't mind. Just push that tray aside. That's it. Good. Now we can see one another better.

My name's Dale Reichert. I'm a book editor. Fiction mostly. I love a good story. Always have. So, I decided to see if I could make a living at it. It's great to see a manuscript from start to finish: Take a writer's dream and hard work. Guide it through an editorial committee to gain approval of the project. Work with the author for months, design the text, see that the printer does a nice job. And then, one day, a happy author's sitting in your office almost, it seems, *caressing* the first copies of the newly printed book. It's terrific. I really enjoy it. That's how today was going to be. I thought. There was an editorial conference.

I knew that I had little hope of convincing my two editor colleagues and the publisher to take a chance on this new novel I was bristling to get under way, because its hero was a pacifist. But I was bound and determined to give it my best try anyway.

It made sense to me before. But then, back in the conference room, things looked greyer. Hope was definitely not on the upswing. Let me explain the setting.

It's 1990. There are no windows in the conference room at our publishing firm. This is quite typical in New York City office buildings. Only top executives usually have a window in their offices. It makes sense therefore that conference rooms, which anyone can use, would be in the central portions of the floors near the elevators. No windows. No need for guests to see much of the inner workings of the company when they had to come and make a presentation in the conference room.

But everyone there today was "company." The publisher, two editors, and me, the junior editor of this group, even though I've been with the firm for six years.

This conference room is not made for creature comforts. It is totally utilitarian and sterile. This is not the boardroom, where the mahogany table, walls, and bar were made for finer groups and higher ideas. This is a bare bones editorial conference room. The walls are white formica. Very stark. No wall hangings to alleviate the expanse of totally uncommitted boundaries. There is no thought of interrupting nor distracting what goes on in this room. It was built to prevent such things. They weren't, and aren't, supposed to happen. There are no phones. The room is essentially soundproof for all intents and purposes. Secretaries are

not allowed to “break in.” What you bring in with you to start a meeting is what you use during it. If you forget something, it’s just too bad. If you come in unprepared, that’s also too bad. If you are less equipped to deal with a situation than someone else, you lose. That is the atmosphere. That is the general idea. What you have in your hands and in your head is what gets you by in this room—and gets you out of it in the end. Those were “The Rules.”

The table is equally uninviting for long stays. It is white formica as well. None of it is chipped. It is kept very clean. The remains of a former session are all assuredly wiped away before the next group comes in. Any newsprint or Xerox grey smudges that mar the table, when charts and copies are slid across the table to prove a point or buttress an argument, are all cleaned by chemical-safe Glass Plus and ScotTowels long before another group enters. The white plastic molded chairs are also wiped clean.

There is absolutely no need to empty ashtrays. There is no smoking allowed. This maintains fresh air and clean surfaces. It also keeps smokers on edge. Of course, none of the key decision makers in the company’s top management smoke. Anymore.

And none of the decision makers is particularly fond of trying to sell pacifism. Not to a Reaganesque audience. Not to those who still applaud last year’s “shoot down” of two Libyan fighter jets over the Med. But I still do have a few things going for me. One true saving grace on the personal side is that I don’t smoke. As far as the novel’s plot line is concerned, it is unique enough so no one has sales figures to disprove my case that the book will sell. Figures that some computer had been coaxed to disgorge in a frenzy when the agenda arrived yesterday afternoon.

And lastly, not to brag—you’ll have to understand *some* things about me *as others see me* (if for no other reason than to find my story credible)—but others at the publishing firm feel I have a fantastic ability to think on my feet, and on my seat, when the climate and décor of the conference room call for it.

In conference, the white presentation board and its colored felt tip pens offer the only opportunity for the presenter to get up on his or her feet and make a case from a more comfortable position. There is also an overhead projector, concealed sleekly, almost for a fact unnoticeably, into the surface at the foot of the table. Its design does not readily give away its purpose. But few people dare to use it when the publisher is in attendance, since that requires blinding him by shining the overhead projector in his face or having to ask him to move. Each of those unlikely alternatives usually has the effect of shortening most meetings and makes what *was* said so filtered through contempt that the presenter might as well not have bothered.

I had information pre-written on the erasable white board. I had decided against the projector. With all this, on any other given day, I would have been prepared. Oh, but not today. It truly wasn’t my fault. Really. No one could have been expected to be prepared for what was to transpire before this day was over.

It was my custom to be in the conference room about fifteen minutes early. I had this habit of making sure everything was in order. Ironically, I found out late today that my habit really annoyed the secretaries who were responsible to keep the room properly prepared. It seems they felt threatened by my doing the preparations, so apparently they were much less careful about watching to keep others out of the room when I was chairing a session.

I didn’t intend anything by it really. It’s just my way. There’s no room in my way of doing things for blaming someone else for something in my control. When I chair a session,

I bring writing pads and pencils for others. I place them at each seat so that no one has to reach into the middle and appear unprepared. When I am not the chair, I come precisely on time and with my materials only. It's just my way. What are you gonna do, shoot a guy for that?

So, as I was saying, at promptly ten this morning, the two editors and the publisher came in. They were all dressed appropriately. Three-piece suit for the publisher. Blouse and suit ensemble for one editor and a suit and tie, no vest, for the other. I figured I'd cut the middle ground. Three-piece suit, with the jacket on the back of my chair. I figured that made us all peers to a degree, letting the dress code clearly state who occupied which position for the next hour or so.

"Good morning, Denise. Mr. English. Al. Thanks for coming." I remember thinking to myself: *Not a bad start seeing how nervous I am.*

"I've put some photocopies together for everyone's use after the meeting. I thought this session could be preliminary for the concept review only. I've done some charting on the presentation board for later. I'll open it when we come to that part. First, I thought I'd just review the idea verbally." I thought to myself again: *No sense having those red and blue marker messages staring them in the face now.*

"Does that sound okay to everyone?" They all nodded with little concern for the approach. First the publisher, then Al Stevens. And last, as usual, Denise Walker. But I scolded myself mentally: *You asked a question they could have answered negatively, Dale. That had better be the last time today.* I recall telling myself: *Control the situation, fellow, or you're going to see this whole thing die right in front of you.*

"I have a novelist who hasn't too large a following. Yet. He has two single run books. First one sold 3,000 copies. Second's done about the same so far and looks to have a shot at another thousand before it runs down. The house he went to before isn't interested in his work anymore. So, we're not raiding. Everything looks very clean."

I know I looked for eye contact with the publisher on this point. You see, Barton English was a real stickler for "clean" acquisitions and relationships. He'd been burned earlier in his editorial career by raiders and had made it quite clear to all his editorial people that as publisher he'd "have none of that here." I saw him give me the slightest nod I was hoping for, and then I continued, knowing that I had just hurdled, and left in the dust, one barrier to getting my publisher's approval.

"This guy wants to write a book whose protagonist is a pacifist. Now, this protagonist knows the country's not involved in a war at the time, which in the story is April of 1982. That's after the Reagan administration shot down two Libyan jets after the 'great communicator' wanted to be the first American President to draw a line in the water (to best those who could only do it in the sand up to then) and right at the onset of the Malvinas/Falklands crisis.

"The story's lead character works for an electronics firm that designs software for companies who manufacture computer and video games. He wants clearance to design some software that teaches nonviolent and pacifist means to disrupt war efforts, rather than exploiting militaristic methodologies. He wants the company to ..."

Right at the height of my steam, I was interrupted for the first time that day. It was Denise who had spoken. "Excuse me a minute, Dale." The sound of her voice stopped everyone cold. She had broken in on me mid-sentence. In the pause that followed, the four of us could have heard a pin passing through the air.

The publisher's eyebrows arched in interest at the interruption. I caught myself trying to remember when Denise had ever spoken first at a meeting. I couldn't.

I was stunned. I had been paying so much attention to my publisher's reactions that I felt blind-sided; though I knew Walker hadn't meant to undermine my presentation. I felt myself staring at Denise, rather than just looking her way. She felt it and reddened a bit.

She broke the silence again, waving her hand and shaking her head in apology, "I'm sorry, Dale. I was following you until the part about tactics or pacifist methodologies. Give me an example, so I can stay with this."

I was relieved. She realized she had upset my whole train of thought. So, she added her support by emphasizing her interest rather than faulting my presentation.

I recovered and went on. Altogether the interruption hadn't taken all that long. I hadn't lost control of myself, nor the flow of the meeting.

"Sure. You see this fellow wants to program a new kind of game. The kids playing it do nonviolent things, even if they have to be insurgents against a military power for the game to be attractive enough to sell. In most games, kids are flying a jet plane or driving a tank and exploding an enemy stronghold. But in this story, the designer wants to invent games where the kids have to secretly get children out of a refugee camp, before the occupation government realizes it. He wants players to do away with cataloging power, weapons, energy cells, and magic spells. In their place he wants kids to catalog the names of people whom the game's ruling junta had kidnapped and made disappear, without due process. The skill of the contest involves finding out who's missing, without getting caught. Then players have to get the names to a newspaper or an independent agency, like Amnesty International or the Red Crescent or something, before the junta can capture them or their lists."

Looking back on it, I guess I was really pleased. I took a look around and saw I had everyone's interest. I was satisfied that I had the meeting back where I wanted it, so I left the examples behind and got back to the story line.

"The biggest obstacle the program designer, the hero of the novel, faces is that he really can't sell the directors of the company on his idea. He can't get anyone to agree that the competitor games he's against really are insidiously destructive. He thinks they are preparing juveniles and adolescents to obliterate an enemy without the conscience-riddling problem of having to see or know whom they are killing. But he can't seem to convince anyone of this. The decision makers seem immune to the idea of games desensitizing kids to violence.

"The novel reaches its climax at the height of the Malvinas/Falklands War. The Argentine Air Force uses a French-made Exocet missile to sink the British guided missile destroyer HMS *Sheffield*. Hundreds of Britons die as she sinks. At a meeting much like the one we are having right now, the protagonist lays *Time* magazine out in front of everyone. There in black and white and dying color is the Argentine pilot's account of the sinking. He trained on a simulator computer display. During the combat he shot the missile from some eight miles away, and over the horizon from the *Sheffield*. He never saw the destroyer, let alone the hundreds of British sailors he killed. He says he thought he was actually firing at the aircraft carrier, HMS *Hermes*."

At this point of my presentation, I thought I just about had them. I could feel the decision being turned over in their minds. I tried to ice the cake. "I tell you; this story is

beautiful. You'll love it." But just as I rose and walked halfway over to the presentation board, my day changed beyond my wildest dreams.

The door to the conference room burst open. The sight before our eyes amazed us more than Denise Walker's voice had just minutes before.

Mark Hopkins used to work at the firm. He was in the art department. In fact, for many years he *was* the art department. Then the company grew, and he took on assistants and apprentices. It all got to be too much. He was fine on his own. Actually, he was brilliant on his own. But the demands of managing others and relating to other managers as a peer were beyond his capabilities. After some rocky years, he was fired. Unfortunately, it was the last years, the rocky ones, that most people remembered. Most people. But not me. And Mark and I both knew it.

But knowing Mark Hopkins wasn't easy at that precise moment this morning. Or, at least, recognizing him wasn't. It seemed easily a week since he'd seen a razor. Maybe more since he spent some serious time in taking care of himself otherwise. I couldn't figure if his appearance or his stench was what made the others freeze and stare.

Before my three seated colleagues in our then-obviously-terminated-conference could raise their voices or their bodies, Hopkins closed the distance between him and me. I had to turn all the way around to face him. I never saw the beginning of his swing, but I caught a look of Mark's fist as it closed in on my right eye. It surprised me that I took the punch so well. I was, after all, still standing. But nobody at the table was yet. It was all happening just too suddenly. Too unexpectedly. Another heavy hand thudded its way into my stomach. The eye that was still open began to water, but I still did not go down.

Now chairs were sliding back from the table. Voices were rasping out commands. But both sounds were too far away from my consciousness to be interpreted, to have meaning for me. Instead, the flat surface of yet another hand was racing into my awareness. The crack it made against the side of my face was incredibly loud as it reverberated in my ear.

I sensed the next blow would do it. I would be on the floor after the next one landed. My voice boomed out of some dreamland and thundered loudly. It startled everyone in the room. "That is enough. No more hitting." And with that, my hand shot through the short distance between my face and another on-rushing fist. Mark later told me his wrist had never known such pain. His hand froze in midair. He tried to pull it back but found it would not budge. Again, my far-away-sounding firm and booming voice shook the room, shook them all. "Do you understand? No more hitting!"

And now, though I found it hard to believe, it was Mark Hopkins's eyes that began to water. Both of them. He told me later it was partly from the pain. Partly from frustration. Partly from exhaustion. Mostly though, from the realization that he had just pummeled the only one in the room who had supported him during his long skid into disgrace and despair. His body trembled. I eased my grip on his wrist. As I withdrew my hand his arms fell to his sides, he collapsed in a chair, and looked up into my swollen and bleeding face.

He shook his upturned face back and forth slowly, and the only words that he could slur were, "I dunno man. I dunno."

It had taken all of three minutes, maybe less. From a pacifist hero to an unanswered beating, and back, in just under two hundred seconds. The scene was remarkable. But no one remarked.

It was one of those times when you wished you knew what everyone was thinking. But I had no way of knowing, of course, right then. But tonight, before you came in, I learned quite a bit about what my colleagues were thinking. Their comments were transcribed by the investigating officers. The SWAT leader who was here went over them with me. In a nutshell—if you'll excuse the expression—here's what I learned from SWAT's commanding officer, a Lieutenant Orosco.

Al Stevens could never stand Hopkins. He had erased the guy from his memory. Today was a nice reminder. Confirmed everything Al had always thought. *"Creative in his own way, but he couldn't take the heat. Always flying off the handle to get his own way. That is, until we sent him on his way."* That's exactly what he told the investigating officers, according to the Lieutenant. Al told them he couldn't wait to get outside that room and call a cop. This Hopkins was ten miles of bad road as far as Al Stevens had been concerned. Now, he would add a few skillion more miles and never shed a tear, never look back. Case closed.

I was surprised to find out that Denise had actually dated Hopkins a few times. Nothing serious. Dinner, dancing, a show or two, a Knicks game at The Garden once. But strictly *"thank you for a nice night" at the front door*, according to her statement. She told the officers that she remembered Mark as having been a handsome man. A good dresser. Very meticulous worker, almost compulsively so, she recalled. He stayed late a few times to finish a job by a deadline for her when he didn't have to do it. So, she figured she owed him. *"No big scene. It just didn't work out. We both knew it. Neither of us wanted an office romance anyway."*

I can't believe these quotes are popping out of my head as we're sitting here talking about this tonight. But that SWAT boss gave me a pretty intense grilling here this evening. Orosco was hell-bent on getting me to confirm what others said happened today, and what had taken place in the past. It wasn't easy because my brain was quite scrambled. It still is a little—as you can tell from my switching from past events to today's episode. I'd have a blue pencil out marking verb tenses like crazy if I were editing a manuscript with our discussion right now. A nurse said I may have been concussed.

Anyway, back to the SWAT guy. This Orosco was quite the persistent interviewer. He drew out from me that I realized Denise had known Hopkins felt she betrayed him when he was up for review back then. She had said nothing to get him fired. But she also had said nothing to save his hide, either. This Lieutenant said Denise told the investigators today that she shivered for a moment today in the conference room as she remembered that last, long look he gave her two years ago on the day of his dismissal. No one had ever looked more forlornly and pitifully at her in her entire life, she said. And this morning, as he sat dejected and sobbing in the conference room, Denise claimed Hopkins looked forlorn and pitiable to her again. But this time it had nothing to do with her. She was convinced of that. In fact, she forced herself to be *very* convinced of that. And just to make sure, believe it or

not, this is what she told the Orosco himself, *"I looked long enough for a feeling of disgust to take hold. Then I looked away."*

According to her statement to the investigators, that's when she noticed the blood for the first time. It was splattered all over the wall behind my shoulder. The blood running from my nose after punch number one had patterned a wonderful Rorschach, as she called it, when Mark slapped my face so powerfully after that. She allowed it to capture her attention so she wouldn't have to look at Hopkins any longer. Amidst her fascination with the design, she said she heard Barton English's shaky voice.

I remember hearing him, too. But it seems like a long time ago. That happens when you lose respect for a person you once held in high esteem, as I did today. It seems to make time move so fast. It's as if you don't want to be reminded that just some moments or hours ago you thought good things about a person, whom now, upon as great a revelation as I had today, you wish you did not have to know or deal with that person ever again.

Between what I recall and what Lieutenant Orosco related to me, it went something like this: "What the hell's the meaning of this, Hopkins? And who let you in here, anyway?" But there was no answer to either of his questions. So he tried again, seeming to gain confidence with each new question. "You don't think you're going to get away with storming in here like this do you? You can't possibly think I'm going to sit still while you assault my employees, do you?" Then, almost comically, it must have dawned on English that, indeed, that was precisely what had actually happened. He let go of that and did what he usually does in tough spots. He tried to bully his way through. He left off with the questions and tried to exert his authority.

My SWAT "debriefing" was intriguing because Orosco intermingled the publisher's reactions with the editors' recollections, as told to the investigators and directly to him. His notes, on a small wire-spiral flip pad he withdrew from the cargo pants pocket of his fatigues, went on to disclose that as the publisher began shouting again, Al Stevens was slowly coming to the realization that not one of them had yet addressed me. Stevens was also apparently just beginning to notice all the blood on the wall and the mess all over my shirt. They were all fixed on coping with the specter of Mark Hopkins, past and present, instead. Before Al could start to come my way, he told the police that English started in again, moving toward Hopkins and blocking Al's path to me. "You always thought you were a big shot," screamed the publisher. "But you learned you couldn't handle it. You're weak. You're no big shot ..."

I learned later from my attacker, that hearing the word *"shot"* shouted at him twice started to bring him around again. Hopkins reached under his rumpled and bar-stained jacket. English continued his verbal barrage, "And I'll see to it that you never work in this industry again ..."

That's when English later told the cops he swallowed whatever threat he had lined up for his next salvo. He made the startling discovery that looking down the barrel of a handgun pointed at the bridge of his nose had a profound way of making him think again before he'd yell at the horrid figure pointing it at him. Lieutenant Orosco really must have taken a dislike to the publisher because he had a snide grin on his face when he told me that part of the story.

But it was words, not bullets, that Hopkins shot back at his old boss as he rose, almost gracefully, from the chair. There was nothing graceful about his drunken voice, though, as it rose with every exhale. "Firin me onct wernt anuf? Kickin me outta here wernt

anuf? Refusin to give me a recmendation in two years soes I could start over somewhere else in this town wernt anuf? Now yer gonna go for the whole industry, huh? You make me sick! Git outta here. The whole three of ya. Now. I mean it. Git!"

And "git" they did. Fast. No questions asked. Right out the door in scrambled single file. Hey, you know how the SWAT leader referred to them? It really made me laugh. He called them Biff, Bamm, the "thank you, ma'am."

Well anyway, back to this morning. Mark spun around on me all of a sudden. You see, he had thoughtlessly turned his back on me and dropped his guard. Hopkins said all too calmly, "You, Dale, will stay. Have a seat." I sat down heavily in the chair at the foot of the table.

Moving across catty-corner to the other side of the table, Hopkins sat down. He placed the handgun on the table near the publisher's chair, well out of my reach. He took out a crushed package of cigarettes and a book of matches. "Don't spose there's any ashtrays in here, eh Dale?"

"No, Mark. I don't suppose either of us would expect to find an ashtray in here. Being that both of us know The Rules about the room." I was hoping I could keep calm on the outside. I knew as soon as the fear—that was slowly twining its fingers around my aorta—climbed high enough to strangle the muscles of my face, I was going to be in big trouble.

I can remember thinking to myself: *(Of course, imagining you're going to be in big trouble is pretty much a scream in itself, if you'd excuse the expression, Dale boy.)*

Mark took offense. "Don't make sport of me, Dale. I know The Rules. And I intend to smoke." He adopted a formal tone as he eased over and into the publisher's chair. For a moment, his voice was quite firm and clear. Just hearing it getting lucid really frightened me. I knew that if the excitement had sobered Mark up, it was going to become impossible to get out of there.

"Gonna smoke this here cig'rette ... an the rules ... an, rye now pardner, only the good Lord above knows what elst."

I could hardly believe hearing such a scenario of my immediate future could be a relief, however slight. But there were lots of cracks for hope to shine through. I have this *little voice* inside my head sometimes that keeps me on balance. It was working overtime this morning. I heard it then cheering me on to hope. *(He's not totally sober, yet. He hasn't made up his mind finally, yet. And God's still in the picture, for now.)*

"See here, Dale. I member the confrenct room rules. What you bring in with you ..." and his sad voice trailed off as Hopkins took his first long drag, inhaling deeply. He exhaled with relish. Through the smoke, he shot me an eerie sidelong glance, nodded, and simply said, to no one in particular, "Yup, I member. I member real good." At the sound of those words and the little snicker that followed them, I felt the blood in my arms grow cold and sprout goosebumps from my elbows to my wrists. I watched as the artist meticulously balanced the lighted match on the edge of the table. As it burned itself out, it singed a trail of yellow into the virgin formica.

Hopkins then rose, took a few steps toward me, and approached the white presentation board. He opened it carefully to see what was inside. "Sumptin new sinct my days," he mused to no one special. "Jest chekin. Caint be too careful ya know," he said in my direction. But the fact that he left the gun unattended suggested otherwise. The red diagram on the board caught Mark's eye. "Well, lookie here, Dale. Ya dint git to finch ya report. Les let ol' Markie give er a look see."

Hopkins took a half step backwards, again away from the gun, to see what was on the board more clearly. He highlighted the words he wanted to, and muttered the others, as he read the board and smoked.

"Protagonist...cumpprogs...refgees...pasfist...Falkins..." and catching himself one word later, "whoa, Dale boy, wha tave we here?" He turned to look directly at me. "This yer book prosal?"

I nodded and locked onto Hopkins's eyes. Mark blinked repeatedly, not liking the stare at all. He avoided my scrutiny by looking over his shoulder at the board, and jamming his thumb backwards in the air toward it. "Figgers yud be thone ta bring a pasfist book in ere. None elst wud ave tha guss, or be able ta git it thru. Didja?"

My little voice was whispering to me when the question came: *(He's still a little under the booze, but he's breaking through. You haven't much time).*

I was caught off guard to have a question to answer. *(Better keep alert, Dale boy. If you miss your cue, you'll be giving him the upper hand. Wouldn't want to do that. Never get control of this situation if he gets the upper hand)* one part of my mind informed me. Another synapse sped an answer out aloud in high gear, "I think I just about had them. I think it was going to get through. But we were sort of interrupted. The others had something to do. They didn't say what, but it seemed something came up, sort of unexpected, you might say. They had to leave. So, I lost them. In fact, they didn't even say as much as a goodbye."

"That's real choice, Dale. Nice touch. But then again, you always had a nice touch. Like the papers on the table." He paused a bit and looked around the room, as if recalling the familiar and sighting the new. "Ya probly use all these fancy trapshuns in here too. Whas tha in frona ya in the enda tha table? Betchya really get inta using that for your big books, Dale."

I can still hear that little voice warning me: *(He's getting more focused and stronger, Dale boy. Watch out. Things are going to get rolling here very fast if you don't slow things down. And when they get rolling, they'll soon after get rocking. You can bet your life on that, my friend.)*

"Sometimes I use it. But the trouble with it is that you can't ..."

The voice screamed inside my head so loudly, I wondered if Hopkins could hear it across the room. *(Hey. Hey. Careful! I said careful. Damn it. Don't tell him that.)*

"... well, never mind. Yeah, sometimes I use it."

Hopkins had missed it. I thanked God—then and now—that he had. He cut in, "Like I was sayin though, yer the only one hule git a book bout a pasfist into print from this place.

"Ya still inta that nonviolence stuff?" Hopkins asked me this question as he walked back to the head of the table and sat down in the publisher's chair. Reaching into his unkempt jacket for another set up for a new smoke, Mark showed he still had the habit of tapping the cigarette against the palm of his hand before lighting up. The simple gesture reminded me of the nights we'd go for a drink before heading home. We'd have a shot or two. Mark'd have a smoke, always packing the tobacco tighter in the cigarette by tapping it in his palm. Mark would talk about his time in Vietnam. I would tell of my alternate service in a Harlem hospital emergency ward.

"Anybody round here know bout your, shall we call it, 'war record,' Dale?" The knowing look on Mark's face showed he was bringing himself, his speech, his balance, and his mind under greater focus. Going back in time was probably reassuring for him. It was

his way of bringing him into equality with me again. I knew him well enough from our dealings before that he was establishing our earlier friendship, not today's assault, as the new ground rules for the conference room.

Resolved to it, my mind, as if a warden, pronounced my sentence: *(Well, Dale boy, you lost round one. He's really here, now. Entirely. Be on your guard. Because now all that's left is for him is to make up his mind. And, oh yeah, to get God out of the picture.)*

"Nope. My 'war record' is something that only you and I know about, Mark."

The warden turned into a coach: *(That's it. See if you can get this thing calmed down by remembering the old days. The days before the trouble began. Keep leading the talk that way. Get—and keep—control of this situation.)*

A cynical laugh escaped from between the cigarette and the cloud of smoke in front of Mark's lips. Lips that remarkably were speaking clearly. Very clearly. "Well, Dale, you earned the purple heart today. The purple heart of pacifists. Two blows to the head and a hard shot to the gut, and no striking back. You know, you're the only guy I spent so much drinking time with who I knew I'd never want as my only buddy in a bar fight." He exhaled smoke and another laugh, but this time it was one of curious regret, not cynicism.

I filled the pause. "I can remember we went to the wall often with Barton English over a book cover design, Mark. But the thought of standing back-to-back with broken-neck beer bottles and facing an angry mob in a barroom brawl isn't a picture I can bring to mind too quickly. Not without laughing, anyway. I'd be too comical. I'd probably inflict a mortal wound on my own hand trying to break the damn thing off against the bar."

Suddenly I had an almost out-of-body sensation. For some reason, my last words worked a change in the very atmosphere of the room. Things had suddenly become tranquil. The imagined scene of a bar fight that was so comical to me had exactly the opposite impact on Hopkins. Something, from both inside and far away took hold of Mark's eyes. I felt as if I could have almost stood up, walked right past him, and out the door without Mark's even noticing. But I was too mesmerized at first and then a sustaining awe captivated me and prevented me from trying.

Outside the door things were going on beyond our notice. I learned of these things this evening during Orosco's visit. As lead SWAT commander, the Lieutenant was summoned as soon as English, Stevens, and Walker got to a phone. Now he was in the hallway on a special police band communicator. He nodded as he listened. Occasionally he spoke a name to see if certain units were positioned as he wanted. Satisfied everything was in order, he was about to silence the communicator. It hummed and he put the earpiece back in place. He stood listening to the report from the Veteran's Administration. He did not nod. He asked no names. His satisfaction vanished.

Dressed in battle fatigues that looked very different from those he wore in the Mekong Delta two decades earlier, the Lieutenant turned to his two officers and English. What he had just heard on the communicator caused his face to take on a look of regret and sadness, though no less determined than it had been earlier, when he first arrived.

He was abrupt. He turned to the publisher. "Okay, sir, you were his employer. What can you tell me about this fellow Hopkins?"

"What I can tell you is that I fired the bastard almost exactly two years ago. He hasn't been seen nor heard from since. In fact, the son of a bitch never arranged an exit interview. They're supposed to, you know. It says so in the company's employ..." Barton was getting up an indignant head of steam. But the SWAT commander told me he stopped the publisher dead in his tracks.

"Enough. I don't want to know your company rules. I want to know about the guy inside with the gun. Why did you fire him? Why did he skip the interview?" The Lieutenant said it was clear the publisher was not accustomed to being made so uncomfortable in his own place of business. But there was little sense in his complaining.

So, he recalled and then spoke, "I fired him because he was an incompetent manager. I don't know why he didn't arrange for an exit interview. I can only presume he didn't have the guts to go through with it." English was through. He had come to the end of his answer. He was visibly troubled. His face betrayed the guilt slowly welling up within him. Orosco had seen it many times before in similar workplace violence stand-offs. Authority figures who wouldn't look him in the eye and be truthful. He had long ago lost count of how many times such evasiveness had cost people their lives—gunmen and hostages alike, and even innocent bystanders. Not to mention so-called "suicides-by-cop."

Back in the conference room with me, the rush of emotions that welled up within Mark Hopkins's chest and eyes was overpowering. He told me the last time anyone stood back-to-back with him in a bar was twenty years ago. His best friend. His boyhood buddy. The two of them facing off an angry group of Vietnamese. It was against regulations to use arms when off duty he told me. But, he pointed out with an ironic and sly smile, nowhere had Uncle Sam said anything against a bottle of Miller High Life. He recalled and echoed his pal's voice from so long ago, "*straight from America's heartland and into your heart if you take another step.*" The pal he played soldiers with at age eight. And served with as a soldier at eighteen. The pal no North Vietnamese had killed in the fields. The pal no South Vietnamese dared touch in a dingy Saigon bar. The pal dead after twenty disfiguring, disemboweling months of slow death brought to him courtesy of the US Air Force and Agent Orange. The friend he helped bury just ten ugly, angry, long days ago.

A sudden noise from outside the door startled Mark. It brought him back to the present. Brought him face-to-bloody-face with me. I was staring at him. Our eyes met and I asked him, "Are you okay, Mark?"

"Okay? Yea. I'm just great. You reminded me of a friend. That's all."

"Only reminded you of one? What about *being* one myself? I asked desperately trying to gain control of the situation. I had a sense that I had lost round two when I hadn't gone for the door those few moments before. But I knew that was past. It was a fleeting moment surely not to return.

He spoke. "You were—once. The only one I could come to count on here when things started to fall apart. Funny. There were others I knew for a longer time. People who owed me. But they never came forward. And I never called in the markers." A look of sadness and resigned determination crossed Mark's face.

I got annoyed at him and let him know it. "Why not, damn it? A few more voices and English might have been put off. Hell, I'd only been here about four years, and I almost got you a stay of execution." (*Not such a smart choice of words there, Dale*). I ignored the voice. All thoughts of getting out of the room and away from Mark and his gun were gone at that moment. I was genuinely involved and angry. I remembered feeling that deceit and dishonesty pervaded the "staff evaluations" that were required before English swung the axe just two dozen months ago.

Our conversation for the day came full circle. This time the words were not slurred. This time they were clear and resolute. Mark simply looked at me and said, "I don't know, Dale. I just do not know."

I learned earlier this evening that at about this time outside the conference room Al Stevens was mincing no words with the SWAT cop. "More than that, I simply don't know." Stevens was making it clear that he wished the big man in blue and grey urban battle fatigues would stop talking and do his job. That is, to do Hopkins. He wanted to end the interrogation. "And frankly, I don't care. I didn't like the guy then. And I like him even less after what he's done today. The only person at this publishing firm who treated him halfway decently was Reichert. And for his trouble now he's got a busted nose and a gun staring him in the face in a room that you apparently can't rescue him from. Terrific. He gets himself out or he's dead. Great choice."

The commander looked at the haughty executive with disdain and asked one last purposeful question. "You ever go to this Hopkins fellow's house when he worked here?"

"Not on your life!"

"Then you didn't know anything about him then; any more than you know anything about him today?"

"Right!"

The SWAT leader insinuated the question in a hard tone and drove the point home even more with the cold stare he trained using to face down hostile guard dogs. He was starting to care less and less for these people. He needed their help. He wasn't getting it.

"But you backed his getting fired anyway?"

"Damn straight. What is it to you anyway? I'm not on trial here. Why aren't you going in there after him? He's got a gun. For God's sake, use yours before he uses his." Stevens was furious.

Too furious to suit the Lieutenant. His instincts grew into the troubling sense that there was more to this than he was being told. And that *something* was going to be precisely the trigger in his deciding to issue orders to take Hopkins alive; or to terminate him, and the stalemate, without any conversations whatsoever. He told me he was just unable to leave it alone. So as he turned, he looked over his shoulder at Stevens and said, "I get the feeling there's very little in this place that's got to do with God's sake." He recalled to me how Stevens was rocked by the assertion, stood immobile and shaken. And silent.

Meanwhile I was sitting immobile and silent myself in the conference room. I was about to speak when Mark Hopkins broke out of his long pause and continued, "I always had the thought that there was more to my being fired than I was told. I mean, God knows I couldn't handle a whole department. Good Christ, everyone could see that. But other arrangements could have been made. At least I thought so back then. Why the thing went so sour, so fast, I had never been able to figure out. You know, I never was granted a formal exit interview. That's supposed to happen, you know. It's in the company policy manual. To give you a chance to say what you have to say about being fired, about the company."

Mark's voice combined with my recollections and wonder into a kind of blended tone in my ears. And then, he intoned flatly with the deepest regret. "So, I came back today for my 'exit interview.' And I've chosen you to witness it."

I'm here to tell you from this hospital bed, out of everything today, his saying that did me in. Right there and then. I became completely unnerved. It was all too painfully clear I had failed in my attempt to go back in time and re-establish our relationship. You see, I badly miscalculated the effects of expressing anger at Mark's dismissal. It fed his own despair. I pushed the very button I was trying to divert attention from. Every road I kept trying to direct the course of conversation down was a dead end for hope. I knew that my companion in the room was going to determine the outcome of this interview. The old rules were the new rules. Only Mark Hopkins was truly prepared for this session. Only he had brought into the room with him what he needed. I could only sit and listen and wait for whatever light I might find at the end of this tunnel.

So I sat and listened to my old friend. "Two weeks ago, I was browsing through the library out at the VA hospital. I was looking at a series of four books, when the librarian happened along. She says, *'Those are fine books. Really popular here. And outside too. I read in last week's Publisher's Weekly that each is a best seller. They've sold hundreds of thousands of copies each. I've even seen them in bookstores as boxed gift sets for the holidays. The article said the author has made over a half a million dollars in royalties from the series. And nobody's ever seen him. He's been on none of the talk shows. He doesn't grant interviews. He's written nothing else and doesn't have any plans to do so.'*"

Mark continued his story after pausing to listen to something on the other side of the door. "I had a few hours to k ... I had some time on my hands, so I started to read the first book. Now mind you, Dale, I'd never heard of the author before. Never heard of the series. But I'm going along, and I know this book after ten pages. I know the whole damn series. *'And how do I know this'* your eyes are asking me, Dale?" He paused for effect. "Because I designed the books." A slight pause. "*And where did I design them?*" your eyes ask again." He paused again and said dramatically, "Right down the blooming hallway from where we sit at this very minute."

Hopkins stood and walked to the door, in response to the activity we both heard outside in that very same hallway. Mark continued with his interview. But with each new disclosure, his face became somewhat darker in aspect, his eyes narrowed, his mouth twitched at the corners. As he spoke, he walked back to the head of the table, as far away from the door—and from me—as possible.

"No doubt you have the same questions that came flooding in on me that bitter afternoon in the lonesome stacks in that miserable place."

He paused to control himself. I tried to take advantage of the pause. I rose to ask a quick question. "What were you doing out there, for God's sake?"

But my motion was too quick. It startled Mark and he grabbed the handgun and pointed it toward me. That terribly uncertain moment seemed to border on an infinity. We stood at each far end of the conference room's long, white, cold unfeeling table. We both knew we stood on the brink of eternity.

You can believe me when I tell you the tension did not dissolve even though Mark eventually lowered the gun. He did not put it back on the table as he continued, answering my question. "I was on death watch. My first, and last," he hesitated, drew a deep breath and went on, "and probably, my only" ... and he hung on those words a long time ... "true friend was dying slowly from Agent Orange. I stayed. I watched. I waited. Then, I buried him. Ten days ago. Like me, he had no family anymore."

Some more sounds outside were evident to us both and though we could only imagine what it was, it was undoubtedly getting real busy out there. I could even hear them at the far end of the room where I stood. Shaken.

He spoke to me again, right about then. "Sit, Dale. My interview's almost over, I think," as he glanced sideways at the door. He remained standing.

He continued, "I immediately asked the questions that are certainly on your mind. *'If I designed the books here, then why didn't I know the author's name? And why didn't this company publish the books?'* Furthermore, *'All those things being put aside for the moment, why the mystery about the author?'* And lastly, *'What about the author as I knew her to be?'*"

I sat tensely. I never before appreciated the expression of sitting on the edge of your seat as much as I did today. I was aware that the questions were coming more quickly than before. Mark was rushing. We both knew something was going on outside. We could only imagine what. Time was obviously moving quickly, and Hopkins was precisely keeping pace with it. He was, in fact, mastering it. I knew there was little time left for me to wrest control of the events. After being quiet for so long, my little voice came back again from the deep recesses of my brain: *(You've got just one shot at it. Make it count, Dale. Make the right choice or die.)*

Like a harmony line beneath my own thoughts, I could hear Mark's voice continue, a bass fugue under my simpler lyric and melody line. "The author, as I knew her to be, died before the books made it out of my hands. I did all the design work on them myself. I had met the woman and liked her tremendously. I didn't trust anyone else to handle her creativity. My old nemesis about not delegating work was in full force on that project."

"Who else knew of them?" I interrupted, frantic for the time it might buy.

Mark eyed me closely, judging to see whether he thought I was trying to stall his interview, to slow him down. He judged my response to be automatic and genuine, with no trickery involved. "No more questions, Dale. This is my interview," pointing the gun at himself for emphasis and nodding to get my agreement. I put up one hand, fingers splayed, and nodded back. Mark went on. "Only the sponsoring editor and the publisher knew of the series. I had always figured that it died with the author. I never saw the company release it and actually forgot about it. As you can imagine" he said with a sickly grin, "I didn't hold my breath to see what book list was coming out each season after getting canned."

The nervousness in Hopkins's grinning face was growing and it colored his voice. "The question perking in your head now, of course, dear Dale is 'Who was the sponsoring editor?' Well, here's your turn to put the pieces together ..." And he emphasized it was my turn to put the pieces together by pointing at me with his gun.

As Hopkins had been growing more tense, he had been glancing more frequently at the door as he spoke. Meanwhile I was gradually and quietly gliding my chair back from the table, ever so slightly. It appeared that Mark had not noticed. Still nagging me, that little voice kept at my ear: *(Nice and easy now, Dale boy. You wouldn't want to be caught with your legs stuck under that table if for some ungodly reason you had to move fast, now would you?)* The interior voice in my head was racing ahead of Mark's distant tones. He seemed far away again, somehow almost remote. I was aware of the danger I was in, and I was amazed at how my adrenaline was pumping. I was able to stay with Hopkins's story, hear almost every shuffling sound from outside the door, and subconsciously run the whole thing in fast forward so I'd somehow know what to do when the time came.

I hadn't felt such a rush since my draft-related Saturday nights in the emergency room. The drunks. The car accidents. The domestic squabbles. The bar fights. And that's when that know-it-all little voice caught me up again with a sarcastic barb: *(Well congratulations buddy, you finally figured out how to get back to it. Well good for you—bar fights. That's what got this thing rolling, Dale baby. Don't drift off now to the good ole days in Harlem. You'd better get back to today, because Markie's not in Saigon. He's here. And it isn't Miller time quite yet. But it's coming).*

And come it did, shattering my reclusive thoughts. Mark's voice came to me again, slowly, quietly, almost a conspirator's whisper. "Here's your hint, Dale, to pick up on all the pieces. The author—who no one has ever seen—has written nothing else—and who has collected a cool half million dollars in royalties—goes by the name of *Bart Stephens*."

With that, a pathetic grin smeared itself across Mark Hopkins's face as he looked down the long table at me. For my own part, I couldn't begin to imagine what my face looked like. My punched eye was swollen closed to a slit. The dried blood on my upper lip and good cheek felt sticky. My slapped cheek still stung fiercely and felt like it might even be cut. But probably the most amazing of all was how startled my good eye must have looked to Hopkins at the moment of his disclosure. How agape my mouth hung at hearing the blended pseudonym. Suddenly it all dawned on me even before Mark's lifeless and confiding voice spoke it out.

"And so, my good and gentle pacifist interviewer, we come together to the final and only possible conclusion as to why I was fired. Fired without any support from my *supporting* editor—Al Stevens. To why I was always suspicious that something more was involved than explained. To why a reassignment away from management duties and back to my beloved artwork wasn't the corporate decision about my disposition and abilities. To why I was blackballed by my former publisher and employer—Barton English—in the hopes I would leave the City. And to why I was never granted an exit interview, lest I discover the truth.

"And now I know the truth, as do you. The truth. Learned on a death watch by me. And learned on a death watch by you."

I've got to tell you I know I was visibly shaken by his fatal admission. I noticed Mark's arm was awkwardly bringing the gun level to the white, cold tabletop again.

"I have done all that I decided I would do as I stood at my last friend's grave."
His voice was that of a pallbearer again. *(He already did make up his mind, and you didn't see it, Dale boy.)*

"I've done all that heaven and earth could rightfully expect of me." And again: *(Hell, Dale. God's out of the picture now, too; dismissed like the rest of us. It's over.)*

"I have given you my interview."

Right then I started talking to myself. I didn't need any precognitive voice any more. *(Think fast, Dale, my man. And act even faster. Get on top of this situation or you're going to see it die right in front of you ... and you with it, baby.)*

"And now only my exit remains."

There was a disturbance right outside the door. At the very same moment the ceiling lights in the room flickered and went out. In an almost hysterical voice, Mark called out, "And where were you when the lights went out, Dale?"

My subconscious instincts were dead on. I reached deftly and hit the switch on the overhead projector.

Two SWAT cops crashed through the door, expecting the room to be dark. The first SWAT member came in low. From behind the light source and invisible to him in the glare of his night vision headset, I was shouting out, "No shooting. There'll be no shooting!" But it did no good. My hopes were dashed. I had seen something in Mark's face just before the lights went out that convinced me Mark never intended to use his gun on anyone else.

My unexpected light caused the second SWAT shooter to hesitate before tossing the stun grenade. In that split second of time, Mark was illuminated in the stark wash of the brilliant rectangle that the projector cast down the long, white, table and over the publisher's white plastic chair, directly into Mark's face. Mark had his gun pointed directly *at himself*, his thumb paused over the trigger. In the instant the SWAT fury raked through the air and into Mark's head and heart, his own reflexive clutch triggered three rounds of his own into his chest and neck.

I really wish I hadn't seen him that way. I keep crying every time it goes through my mind. I'm sorry—good old hospital gowns again—give me a minute, please.

Well, as I was trying to tell you, there in the graphic flashing images on that unyielding backdrop were the remains of my friend. Mark Hopkins. I had actually witnessed the horrid specter of Mark's brutal, planned death. A death that no coroner was likely to prove was caused by a police bullet, because of the damage his own did to him.

There seemed more of him *on* the wall than was suspended in his moment of death in front of it. As he slid down the cold and crimsoned barrier, Mark's fixed eyes stared back from eternity and interred his secret, and his true sense of purpose of this exit interview, within the depths of this pacifist's heart.

The concussion of the stun grenades and unforgiving light overwhelmed me and knocked out my last physical and emotional reserves.

As I slipped into some welcomed and still place of near unconsciousness, my memory saw Mark's entrusting look and heard my own voice answering my friend's eyes with quiet resolve. *(They'll wish they hadn't. I don't know how. Yet. But I will. And afterwards, I just might go to a pub and break a bottle or two off on a bar.)*

I came to a little, but not completely, mind you, as I was being rolled out through the reception lobby on a gurney, toward the elevators. I guess I was drifting in and out. The last distinguishable voice I heard under the crowd noise and the raw squawking of police band radios was Denise Walker's. "And the thing is, this guy was trying to change the rules of the game, so that pacifists could have a way to win. The idea was to uncover some names and get them to the newspapers, so the people in power could be exposed for the evil they had done."

And that's what I've been lying here trying to figure out before you came in to see me. Just how to do exactly what another pacifist was trying to teach kids to do with a computer game.