

Fifty Grand

Adrian McKinty

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Extract

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FIFTY GRAND

A NOVEL OF SUSPENSE

ADRIAN MCKINTY



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“Fifty grand is a lot of money,” I said.
“No,” Jack said. “It’s just business.”

—ERNEST HEMINGWAY,
“Fifty Grand,” 1927

NOWHERE, WYOMING

The frozen lake and the black vacuum sky and the dead man pleading for the return of his remaining days.

“There must be some kind of mistake.”

No.

“You’ve got the wrong guy.”

No.

“You’re gonna pay for this.”

Viejo compañero, I’ve paid in advance.

And before he can come up with any more material I unroll a line of duct tape, cut it, and place it over his mouth.

I step away from the car, check back up the trail.

Moonlight on the green Park Service hut. Snow on the dogwoods. No new tire tracks.

Apart from me and my confederates, no one’s been here in days, probably weeks. I close the BMW’s trunk and take off my ski mask. He kicks at the side panels with his soles but the muffled protests cease after a couple of minutes.

I plunge my left hand into the coat pocket and bring out an orange.

I stare at it obsessively for a moment, but the color and the smell are making my head spin. I return it to the coat.

“An orange,” I say to myself with a smile.

I breathe the crisp December air, shiver.

I open the driver's-side door.

The seat. The key. The heat.

I rummage in the bag and find Paco's Mexican cigarettes.

I partially close the door and look at the BMW's rocket ship display. Which of these is the clock? Ah, there it is next to the GPS: 6:02 a.m. At least a one-hour wait. We won't go onto the ice until sunup—no point in taking unnecessary risks in the dark.

I light the cigarette, inhale the loose, sweet tobacco, and let it coat my lungs.

The smoke warms my insides to such an extent that when I exhale I feel empty, scared.

I take an almost panicky second breath of air and smoke.

Keep it there.

Another sad exhalation. Two more iterations but the cumulative effect is the opposite of what I'm expecting, making me jittery, on edge.

I turn on the interior light and examine the pack. A comical English explorer in shorts and pith helmet. Faros. Had them before—when I was a teenager Mexican cigarettes were the only affordable luxury you could get. Uncle Arturo managed to find Marlboros, but my father said that Faros and Rivas were just as good. I must be so nervous that I'm way beyond their power to relax me.

At the bottom of the Faros packet, there is, however, something that looks like a fat joint. I take it out and sniff it. Grade-A narc from Canada—Paco must have stolen it somehow. Maybe the night of the party.

It would be very tempting to light it up, but I should probably save that for *after*. One of those and I'd be on my ass for hours.

I put it away. Check the clock: 6:06 and still as dark as ever.

A breeze cuts through the door and I pull it fully closed. In brittle Euro-trash an annoyed disembodied voice tells me to fasten my seatbelt. I try to ignore it but it grows increasingly demented. "Fasten seatbelt, fasten seatbelt, fasten seatbelt."

I fool the computer by clicking and quickly unclicking the belt.

"Seatbelt secured," the computer sighs with relief.

Clock says 6:08.

I put the cigarettes in the backpack and kill the headlights.

Quick scan through the radio stations. Country. Religious. Country. News. Country. Religious. I nix the radio and max the heat.

Nothing to do now but wait.

I wait.

A gust rustling the tree branches along the ridge.

A starlit vapor trail.

Kicking from inside the trunk.

The radio again, a Nebraska station playing polka. A ten-thousand-watt Jesus station out of Laramie.

The kicking stops.

I relight the Faros, finish it, wipe my fingerprints from the butt, and throw it out the window.

6:15.

I leave the window open and turn everything off.

And sit there.

Sit.

As the day meditates.

Time passes and finally a hint of morning in the black distance and above me a blue, distilled silence as night switches off its stars.

Here goes.

From the passenger's seat I unwrap the ROAD CLOSED—SUBSIDENCE DANGER sign I stole yesterday in Fairview.

Won't be enough to fool a ranger from the Park Service but it should keep away any early-morning hunters or ice fishermen.

I grab the Smith & Wesson 9mm, get out of the car, and walk back up the trail until I find the aluminum swing gate. In the distance I can see the lights of vehicles on the highway. Big rigs, Greyhound buses, nothing that's coming down here. I duct tape the sign to the top bar of the gate. Hmmm. In the light of day it doesn't look so fantastic but it'll have to do.

I drag the gate through the snow, close it, and lock it with the padlock I've specifically brought for this purpose. You're going to need to be pretty determined to come down this road now.

I take a few steps to the side and admire my handiwork.

Maybe a good idea to get rid of all the footprints.

I grab a tree branch and brush over the area on my side of the gate.

That's better.

Not likely that man or beast is going to come by at this time of the morning, but my business is going to take a while and this should help deter the curious.

I wipe away all the tire tracks and footprints until I reach the bend in the road, then I toss the branch and return to the BMW.

I get back inside and warm my hands over the vents. 6:36. Better get a move on. I grab the green backpack and put the sledgehammer, the gun, the handcuffs key, the gloves, and the ski mask inside.

I get out of the car and close the door.

Dawn is a smear on the eastern horizon and light is beginning to illuminate the low clouds in alternating bands of orange and gold.

Ok.

I shoulder the backpack and walk out onto the lake, bend down and examine the ice.

About twenty, thirty millimeters thick. Good enough, I imagine.

I trudge back to the car, open the backpack, and put on the gloves and ski mask.

A click of the button and the trunk pops open.

His eyes are wild, his naked body Pollocked with mud, oil, and paint flecks. His legs covered in yellow bruises. He's been trying to kick open the emergency release lever with his knees.

He's having trouble breathing. I see that the duct tape is partially covering his nostrils. The sort of clumsy mistake that could have suffocated him.

I rip the tape off his mouth.

"Bastard," he says, and spits at me.

Save your strength, if I were you, *compañero*.

I lift his legs out and then grab him by the arm and heft him from the trunk onto the embankment. I shove him facedown into the snow, take the knife, and cut through the duct tape at his ankles. I step away from him and remove the Smith & Wesson M&P from my jacket pocket.

He gets to his feet, but he can't do anything with his hands still cuffed behind his back.

I waggle the gun at him to make sure that he sees it.

"Now what?" he says.

I point at the lake.

"I'm freezing. I want my clothes. I'm freezing to death."

I bring the 9mm up to his navel and press it against his bruised stomach.

The gun and the ski mask are iconic images of terror. It would take someone of sterner stuff than him to resist this kind of pressure.

"All right," he says.

I turn him and push him gently in the direction of the lake.

He mutters something, shakes his head, and walks through the frozen snow to the lakeshore.

His body is pale, almost blue white. And he's a big man. Six foot four, two hundred and fifty pounds, none of it fat. He was a college football player back in the day and he's kept himself in shape. Five miles on the treadmill each morning and rugby training every Wednesday with the Gentlemen of Aspen.

More grumbling, and he stops when his soles touch the ice. He hesitates. The snow was full of air and not too frigid but the ice is dry, flat, and sticky. It's cold enough to burn.

"What do you want me to do?"

I'm about to speak for the first time but the words die on my lips. Not yet.
Not yet.

I wave him forward.

"On this?"

I nod and extend the gun.

"Ah shit," he says but begins walking.

It's full light now.

The sun advancing over the plains. The moon a fading scar.

Beautiful.

The lake. The trees.

Frost crystals.

Voleries of geese.

Fish in trance.

"Aow!" he says.

Vapor lock. His soles are stuck and he shudders to a halt. Momentum is the key. I give him a shove. His back tenses at my touch and he doesn't move.

I tap him with the gun.

We begin again.

But the sensation of his powerful shoulder muscle through the glove has made me nervous.

I'm going to have to be very careful when I give him the hammer.

In his freshman year at college he had a charge of assault and battery dismissed (so Ricky thinks) through the influence of his father; and in his senior year he broke another man's jaw, but that never came to anything because it was on the football field.

He's strong. He could snap me in half. Would too, given half a chance.

"How much farther? What is this?" he asks and stops again.

I push him.

Although he moves, there's a little jaunt in his step that makes me think he's up to something.

Got to be careful in spades.

"What's with the silent treatment, buddy? Do you even understand English? Are you mute?"

He turns to look at me.

"Huh? Get me? What are they paying you? I'll give you ten times what they're paying you. What's your price? Name it. Just name it. I've got the money. A lot of money. Everyone has their price. Tell me what it is."

Can you run back time? Can you do that? Are you a mage, a necromancer?

"What have you done with my clothes? I want my clothes. I want my goddamn clothes!" he shouts, furious, stubborn.

Naked in, *amigo*, and perhaps if things don't go well, naked out.

Even so, when the gun waggles he keeps walking.

"What is this? I want my clothes!"

The echo back over the lake opens the floodgates.

"This is insane! This is crazy!" he yells. "You can't shoot me, you can't. You can't shoot me. You can't. I haven't done anything. You got the wrong man. This is a goddamn misunderstanding."

I'm not going to shoot you. That would be far too easy. That would not give us sufficient comfort in the long years ahead.

"Listen to me, listen to me. I know you're not mute and I know you can hear me. Say something. Speak. You think you're being so smart. You're not. I want you to speak. I'm ordering you to speak. Speak to me!"

You want part of it? How about this: enshrined within the Colonial Spanish penal code is the Latin maxim *talem qualem*, which means you take your victim as you find him. American cops call it the eggshell skull rule. Slap someone with a delicate cranium, break it, and they'll still charge you with murder. *Talem qualem*. Take your victim as you find him. In other words, be careful who you kill. Be careful who you kill, friend.

"Madness. This is madness. You've obviously made some kind of mistake. I'm not loaded. You want to go to Watson, he's worth a billion. I'll show you. I'll show you. He's got a van Gogh, a Matisse. Him, not me.

Dammit, talk to me! Who do you think I am? What is this? Who do you think I am?"

I know exactly who you are.

It's who I am that's the mystery. What am I doing here? That one I still haven't figured out.

He stamps his heel into the ice, flexes his shoulder, turns again.

"This is crazy. You don't . . . Have you any idea what you've got yourself into? Do you know who you're dealing with? Ok, I'm no goddamn Cruise but let me tell you something, I'll be missed. They'll come looking for me. Are you listening? Take that thing off your head. I don't know what they told you. I don't know what you think you're doing but you're making a big mistake, pal. Big mistake. Biggest mistake of your whole life. That's it, isn't it? You don't know who I am, this is just a job to you, isn't it? Isn't it? Well, let me hit you with the truth, bud, you're making a life-changing error."

His confidence is starting to return. It didn't take long. His default position is the black rider, the boss, the center of the Ptolemaic universe. I prefer that.

"This has gone on too far. Way too far for a practical joke. Right now you're doing permanent damage to the soles of my feet. I'll see you in court for this."

He still doesn't get it. He still doesn't see why we're here.

"Listen to me, pal, you have no idea what you're mixed up in. You don't. Name a sum of money. Go on, just name it. A hundred thousand dollars? Two hundred thousand dollars? How about a cool half mil? Half a mil. Easy money. Easy money. Come on, buddy. You and me. We'll pull one over on 'em. We'll show them. Come on, whaddya say? I'm a grifter, you're a grifter. Come on, man, you can see the angles, we'll play 'em together."

Oh, *compañero*, is everything about you fake? A performance? Where did you learn to talk like that? The movies? TV? Isn't there anything real under that sheath of skin?

I slide the breech back on the M&P and it makes a satisfying clunk.

He continues shuffling, but only for a few paces.

"Come on, man," he says, and turns, and he's so fast I don't even see the drop kick coming.

He jumps with both feet and crashes into my stomach.

The wind is knocked out of me and the gun goes flying. Both of us go down onto the ice with a crash. He falls on me, his thighs crunching against my ribs.

Water and a big fissure forming under my back.

He pivots on top of me, and although his hands are still cuffed he's trying to bite my face.

His teeth snag on the ski mask at my chin, his breath reeking of booze and fear.

I make a fist and thump him so hard the first blow probably breaks his nose. The next gets him in his left eye, and the sideways kick to the crotch is the clincher. He doubles up in agony and I push the writhing mass of naked flesh away from me.

I get to my feet, retrieve the gun, suck O₂.

I look nervously at the crack under my feet. I stand there for a few beats but it doesn't widen.

"Jesus," he says.

Jesus is right. That was really something.

We both could easily have gone right through the surface. The hammer in my backpack would have taken me down to the lake bottom and if the shock hadn't sent me into cardiac arrest, the current would probably have taken me away from the crack and up under unbroken ice. And if I hadn't been able to break through I would have drowned. Shit, even if I'd gotten through somehow, I'd have been too exhausted to get out of the water. I'd have frozen to death in about half an hour. Mary, Mother of God, that would have been too perfect. It almost would have been worth it, just for that. What a wonderful, circular, karmic joke on me.

Yes.

I underestimated you, friend. And if I was a better person I'd let you go.

More deep breaths, hard, until I feel that I'm balanced again, poised between fight and flight.

Behind me the startled ravens stop squawking and resume their perches.

He is gasping for air, blood bubbling in his mouth.

After all the excitement we'll both need another minute. He returns my gaze and, observing the gun, backs away crabwise, trying to make it to the shore. Painful to watch: hands resisting the desiccated ice, heels dragging.

Squeak, squeak, squeak. Clouds. Snowflakes. Squeak, squeak, squeak.

I walk to him.

"No," he says.

His ass sticks to the ice. He rips it free and the crab walk recommences. It's so pathetic I'm starting to feel bad. I point the gun at his stomach.

“No,” he repeats in a whisper.

Nooo. His breath a ghost that vanishes like all ghosts. Desperation in those red, coke crash eyes. I go behind him and lug him to his feet. Ice-burned skin. Human skin.

Sickening, but not much farther now.

“Listen to me, buddy, I can make you rich. I can get you money. A lot of money. Millions. Do you understand? Millions of dollars. Goddammit! Why don’t you understand, what’s the matter with you? Millions of dollars? Do you speak English? Do you understand the goddamn English language?”

I do. It was my major.

“I hope you understand me, because you’re making a mistake. A life-altering—I have men, they’ll find me, and when they do I wouldn’t like to be in your shoes.”

Better my shoes than no shoes.

“You just don’t know who you’re dealing with. You have no idea.”

What next? You’re connected? You’re high up in the mob? Your movements are tracked by drones piloted by the CIA?

Just a few more steps: one, two, three, four.

There, we’re about thirty meters out now, which is far enough.

I give him the universal “stop” sign and signal him to lie down.

He shakes his head. I place the barrel of the gun against his heart.

Still he doesn’t obey.

I walk behind him and kick him in the left calf. His knees buckle and I push his head down, shoving his face against the ice. His body goes limp. Bracing himself.

I put the 9mm in my pocket, remove the handcuff key, unlock one wrist, and quickly get out of his way. I grab the gun again and wait. For a moment he doesn’t believe that I’ve unlocked him, but then when he sees that he’s completely free he gets to his feet and begins rubbing the circulation back into his wrists.

Keeping the gun on him I place the backpack in front of me and unzip the central pocket. I take out the sledgehammer and slide it to him over the ice.

He looks with astonishment at the vicious maple-handled, steel-headed five-kilo sledgehammer.

“What’s this for?” he asks.

I point at the ice.

His face shows incomprehension, but then he gets it. “You want me to make a hole in the ice?”

I nod.

He picks up the hammer.

As I knew it would, my heart starts to race. This is by far the riskiest part of the whole plan. Now, if he tries his trick, I’m dead.

Maybe we’ll get that sweet karmic ending after all.

He’s got a fantastic weapon, he’s strong, he’s angry, he’s free.

He holds all the cards but one.

Information.

He doesn’t know that the gun is empty.

He stares at my masked face for a moment, smiles unnervingly, and tightens his grip on the maple.

He looks like Pitt at the party, like Thor at Ragnarok—the hammer, the ice, the bloody face, the blond locks.

I raise the Smith & Wesson and hold it in both hands. I sight him with the utterly useless gun.

“And what if I don’t?” he says.

I nod as if to say, Try it.

“This is totally insane,” he mutters. He shakes his head in disgust. “What kind of a man are you?”

No kind of a man.

Smith & Wesson. Hammer. Blue eyes. Brown eyes.

“Hell with it then,” he says and violently smashes the hammer into the ice. The first hit cracks the surface. The second makes a hole the size of a football. The third makes a large pancake-size fissure that I can easily lift out.

I put my hand up to stop him. Then with the flat of my palm I signal him to drop the sledge.

It would be easier to start speaking now, to actually tell him stuff, but I’m reluctant to reveal that much of myself until he’s completely where I want him to be.

“You want me to lose the hammer?”

I nod.

“How about I lose it in your head?”

He looks at me and then the gun and he lets the sledgehammer fall out of his hands. Keeping the 9mm on point I walk behind him and push him

back to the ground. The car ride and the cold and this last piece of work have so wasted him that he embraces the ice like an old friend.

I put the snout of the gun on his neck and let him feel it there for a moment; then I take his hands and place them on his lower back; before he can try anything I quickly recuff him.

And that's that. It's over. No escape. If he gives me the wrong answers he's dead.

I lay the gun on the ground, walk to the hole, pick up the ice debris, and throw it out. I widen the hole a little with the sledgehammer and then toss it away as far as I can.

Before he has the time to think I drag him backward by the cuffs into the ice hole. Takes all my strength, which isn't much. When his legs touch the water, he begins to buck wildly but I've got enough momentum now to finish the job.

I shove the rest of him into the freezing lake.

Almost immediately his body begins to convulse in pain. I wouldn't know but I imagine it's like being electrocuted.

For a moment his legs stop kicking and he sinks beneath the water, but then—thankfully—he fights his way back to the surface.

Treading water, looking at me. His legs are powerful and he's so strong I suppose he could keep this up for half an hour or even forty-five minutes if I assisted him a little from time to time.

I sit next to him on the ice and open the backpack.

I take out the Ziploc bag I found in his nightstand. Inside there's six rolls of hundreds, a key of scag, and enough crank to animate half the corpses in Colorado. I suppose it's some kind of emergency treasure. About a hundred thousand in currency and convertibles.

I catch his eye and make sure that he sees what I'm doing. I place the heavy bag in the water in front of him and we watch it sink to the bottom of the lake.

Does that help you understand? This isn't about money.

In fact I can illuminate this even better for you now that you're cuffed and in the goddamn hole. I take off the ski mask.

Recognition dawns immediately, recognition and amazement.

Good. And now for the most important part of all. This is the bit I've been dreaming about. For this I want your full attention.

I lean forward, crawl toward him, and turn his face so that he's looking at me. When his eyes meet mine, I raise the gun, tip it vertical to show him the

empty chamber, and then I click the magazine release and show him the empty clip.

Do you get it now, *compañero*?

Who did this to you? A girl. A wetback armed only with an unloaded pistol. At any time you could have run away and, my friend, when you had that hammer you could have ended this whole thing. But you didn't. She bluffed you out. This girl, this *perra latina*.

He looks at the gun, says nothing.

I'm a little let down.

Where's the fireworks? The fury?

Nothing. Well, you can't have everything.

He saw and he knows.

His legs continue to kick furiously but his feet, in the cold currents of the hypolimnion, are beginning to tire already.

I nod, slide back from the hole, stand, retrieve the hammer, and put it, the gun, and the ski mask into the backpack.

"Help me! Help me! Help me!" he begins to yell.

I scan the shore. Nobody.

"Help me!" he screams, his eyes darting madly. Expecting what? Duck hunter? Ice fisherman?

No. No one comes here in the winter, and just to be on the safe side I've put up a sign, I've locked the gate, I've wiped the footprints.

"Help me! Heelp meee!" he screams.

The words hang for a moment and then freeze onto the ice.

His lips are turning blue. His skin, red.

He's whispering. I can barely hear. I lean in. "Bitch, bitch, bitch, bitch, bitch, bitch, bitch," he says.

Words are finite. The set of all the words that will ever be spoken is small and the subset of each human's allotment is tiny. These could be your last. Is this really what you want to leave the Earth proclaiming?

"Bitch. Bitch. Bitch. Bitch."

Apparently so. Well, you're going to have to give me more than that if you want to get out of this alive.

After a minute the mantra changes but not by much: "Bitch, bitch, bitch, get you, bitch, you'll see, won't be fun for you, get you, teach you, yeah, bitch."

But then he whispers something else. Something surprising. "Bitch, you've got no goddamn shame."

That's more like it. Where did that line come from? Shame—how old-fashioned. Hector says that shame was one of the casualties of the twentieth century. Hector comes out with a lot of stuff like that. Hector says that Cuba is a woman's mouth, her lips squeezed together in a grimace, bruised and twisted at one end from all the beatings she's taken over the years. You'd dig Hec, maybe we could get him a job in Hollywood. A character actor. A cigar-chomping Miami cop. Do they still make cop movies?

"No shame, get you, bitch . . ."

But you're wrong. I have no morals, no husband, no children, but shame I have by the bucketload.

He starts to scream again.

"Help me! Help me! Help me!"

The duct tape is still in the backpack. I could cover his mouth, but what's the point? Let him scream.

"Help me! Help me! Help me!"

In a minute he wears himself out.

His teeth chattering. His eyes closing.

I pull out the pack of Faros and put two in my mouth. I flip the Zippo and light both. I offer him one of the cigarettes. He nods and I put it between his lips. It'll help him. In a couple of seconds the dissolved nicotine molecules will be firing neurotransmitters that'll release small quantities of dopamine into his brain. As the cold starts to get to him, blood will retreat from his extremities and his brain will become overoxygenated, perhaps releasing more dopamine and endorphins. The feeling will not be unpleasant.

I put my hand beneath his armpit and lift him a little.

He draws on the cigarette and nods a thank-you.

"I just g-gave up. M-man, this is ironic, it r-really is," he says.

Oh, *compañero*, don't you read the poets? Irony is the revenge of slaves. Americans are not permitted to speak of irony, certainly not Americans like you.

He grins.

He probably thinks I'm starting to crack, that I'll change my mind about this business.

I won't but I am so caught up in that grisly smile and the fading blue of his eyes that I don't see the black Cadillac Escalade idle its way to the locked gate behind us. I don't see the doors open, I don't see the men with guns get out.

I don't see anything.

I'm in this moment with this man.

Are you ready?

Are you ready to speak the truth?

Or do you want to wait until the black angel joins us on the ice?

"D-d-don't d-do this. D-don't d-d-do this." His voice drops half an octave, keeps the imperative, but loses the *tone*. "Don't, p-please."

Much more effective.

A call to prayer in the wilderness.

We Cubans are the vagabond descendants of the Muslim kingdom of Granada. We appreciate that kind of thing.

A call to prayer. Yes.

The dogwood minarets.

The ice lake sajadah.

The raven muezzins.

"How d-did it c-come to this?" he asks, crying now.

How did it come to this?

Mi amigo, we've got time. I'll tell you.