
Opening Extract from...

Reamde

Written by Neal Stephenson

Published by Atlantic Books

REAMDE

NEAL STEPHENSON

Atlantic Books
London

First published in the United States of America in 2011
by William Morrow, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.

First published in Great Britain in 2011
by Atlantic Books, an imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Hardback ISBN: 978 1 84887 448 0
Trade Paperback ISBN: 978 1 84887 450 3
Ebook ISBN: 978 1 85789 418 2

Printed in Great Britain

Atlantic Books
An imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd
Ormond House
26–27 Boswell Street
London WC1N 3JZ
www.atlantic-books.co.uk

REAMDE

PART I

Nine Dragons

THE FORTHRAST FARM
Northwest Iowa

Thanksgiving

Richard kept his head down. Not all those cow pies were frozen, and the ones that were could turn an ankle. He'd limited his baggage to a carry-on, so the size 11s weaving their way among the green-brown mounds were meshy black cross-trainers that you could practically fold in half and stuff into a pocket. He could have gone to Walmart this morning and bought boots. The reunion, however, would have noticed, and made much of, such an extravagance.

Two dozen of his relatives were strung out in clumps along the barbed-wire fence to his right, shooting into the ravine or reloading. The tradition had started as a way for some of the younger boys to blow off steam during the torturous wait for turkey and pie. In the old days, once they'd gotten back to Grandpa's house from Thanksgiving church service and changed out of their miniature coats and ties, they would burst out the doors and sprint half a mile across the pasture, trailed by a few older men to make sure that matters didn't get out of hand, and shoot .22s and Daisies down into the crick. Now grown up with kids of their own, they showed up for the re-u with shotguns, hunting rifles, and handguns in the backs of their SUVs.

The fence was rusty, but its posts of Osage orange wood were unrotted. Richard and John, his older brother, had put it up forty years ago to keep livestock from straying down into the crick. The stream was narrow enough that a grown man could cross it with a stride, but cattle were not made for striding, or bred for intelligence, and could always contrive some way to get themselves into terrible straits along its steep, crumbling banks. The same feature made it an ideal firing range. Summer had been dry and autumn cold, so the crick was running low under a paper-thin glaze of ice, and the bank above it threw up gouts of loose dirt wherever it stopped a bullet. This made it easy for the shooters to correct their aim. Through his ear protectors, Richard could hear the voices of helpful onlookers: "You're about three inches low. Six inches to the right." The boom of the shotguns, the snap of the .22s, and the *pow, pow, pow* of the semiautomatic handguns were reduced to a faint patter by the electronics in the hearing protectors—hard-shell earmuffs with volume knobs sticking out of them—which he'd stuffed into his bag yesterday, almost as an afterthought.

He kept flinching. The low sun shone in the face of a two-hundred-foot-tall wind turbine in the field across the crick, and its blades cast long scything shadows over them. He kept sensing the sudden onrush of a bar of darkness that flicked over him without effect and went on its way to be followed by another and another. The sun above blinking on and off with each cut of a blade. This was all new. In his younger days, it had only been the grain elevators that proved the existence of a world beyond the horizon; but now they had been supplanted and humbled by these pharaonic towers rearing their heads above the prairie, the only thing about this landscape that had ever been capable of inspiring awe. Something about their being in motion, in a place where everything else was almost pathologically still, seized the attention; they always seemed to be jumping out at you from behind corners.

Despite the wind, the small muscles of his face and scalp—the parents of headaches—were relaxed for the first time since he had come back to Iowa. When he was in the public spaces of the re-u—the lobby of the Ramada, the farmhouse, the football game in the side yard—he always felt that all eyes were on him. It was different here, where one had to attend to one's weapons, to make sure that

the barrels were always pointed across the barbed wire. When Richard was seen, it was during terse, one-on-one conversations, spoken DIS-TINCT-LY through ear protection.

Younger relations, rookie in-laws, and shirttails called him Dick, a name that Richard had never used because of its association, in his youth, with Nixon. He would answer to Richard or to the nickname Dodge. During the long drive here from their homes in the exurbs of Chicago or Minneapolis or St. Louis, the parents would brief the kids on who was who, some of them even brandishing hard copies of the family tree and dossiers of photos. Richard was pretty sure that when they ventured out onto Richard's branch of the family tree—and a long, stark, forkless branch it was—they got a certain look in their eyes that the kids could read in the rearview mirror, a tone of voice that in this part of the country said more than words were ever allowed to. When Richard encountered them along the firing line, he could see as much in their faces. Some of them would not meet his eye at all. Others met it too boldly, as if to let him know that they were on to him.

He accepted a broken twelve-gauge side-by-side from a stout man in a camouflage hat whom he recognized vaguely as the second husband of his second cousin Willa. Keeping his face, and the barrel of the weapon, toward the barbed-wire fence, he let them stare at the back of his ski parka as he bit the mitten from his left hand and slid a pair of shells into the warm barrels. On the ground several yards out, just where the land dropped into the ravine, someone had set up a row of leftover Halloween pumpkins, most of which were already blasted to pie filling and fanned across the dead brown weeds. Richard snapped the gun together, raised it, packed its butt in snugly against his shoulder, got his body weight well forward, and drew the first trigger back. The gun stomped him, and the base of a pumpkin jumped up and thought about rolling away. He caught it with the second barrel. Then he broke the weapon, snatched out the hot shells, let them fall to the ground, and handed the shotgun to the owner with an appreciative nod.

"You do much hunting up there at your Schloss, Dick?" asked a man in his twenties: Willa's stepson. He said it loudly. It was hard to tell whether this was the orange foam plugs stuffed into his ears or sarcasm.

Richard smiled. "None at all," he replied. "Pretty much everything in my Wikipedia entry is wrong."

The young man's smile vanished. His eyes twitched, taking in Richard's $200 electronic hearing protectors, and then looked down, as if checking for cow pies.

Though Richard's Wikipedia entry had been quiet lately, in the past it had been turbulent with edit wars between mysterious people, known only by their IP addresses, who seemed to want to emphasize aspects of his life that now struck him as, while technically true, completely beside the point. Fortunately this had all happened after Dad had become too infirm to manipulate a mouse, but it didn't stop younger Forthrasts.

Richard turned around and began to mosey back the way he had come. Shotguns were not really his favorite. They were relegated to the far end of the firing line. At the near end, beside a motorcade of hastily parked SUVs, eight- and ten-year-old children, enveloped in watchful grown-ups, maintained a peppery fusillade from bolt-action .22s.

Directly in front of Richard was a party of five men in their late teens and early twenties, orbited by a couple of aspirant fifteen-year-olds. The center of attention was an assault rifle, a so-called black gun, military-style, no wood, no camouflage, no pretense that it was made for hunting. The owner was Len, Richard's first cousin once removed, currently a grad student in entomology at the University of Minnesota. Len's red, wind-chapped hands were gripping an empty thirty-round magazine. Richard, flinching every so often when a shotgun went off behind him, watched Len force three cartridges into the top of the magazine and then hand it to the young man who was currently in possession of the rifle. Then he stepped around behind the fellow and talked him patiently through the process of socketing the magazine, releasing the bolt carrier, and flipping off the safety.

Richard swung wide behind them and found himself passing through a looser collection of older men, some relaxing in collapsible chairs of camo-print fabric, others firing big old hunting rifles. He liked their mood better but sensed—and perhaps he was being too sensitive—that they were a little relieved when he kept on walking.

He only came to the re-u every two or three years. Age and circumstance had afforded him the luxury of being the family genealogist. He was the compiler of those family trees that the moms unfurled in the SUVs. If he could get their attention for a few minutes, stand them up and tell them stories of the men who had owned, fired, and cleaned some of the guns that were now speaking out along the fence—not the Glocks or the black rifles, of course, but the single-action revolvers, the 1911s, the burnished lever-action .30-30s—he'd make them understand that even if what he'd done did not comport with their ideas of what was right, it was more true to the old ways of the family than how they were living.

But why did he even rile himself up this way?

Thus distracted, he drifted in upon a small knot of people, mostly in their twenties, firing handguns.

In a way he couldn't quite put his finger on, these had an altogether different look and feel from the ones who swarmed around Len. They were from a city. Probably a coastal city. Probably West Coast. Not L.A. Somewhere between Santa Cruz and Vancouver. A man with longish hair, tattoos peeking out from the sleeves of the five layers of fleece and raincoat he'd put on to defend himself from Iowa, was holding a Glock 17 out in front of him, carefully and interestedly pocking nine-millimeter rounds at a plastic milk jug forty feet away. Behind him stood a woman, darker-skinned and -haired than any here, wearing big heavy-rimmed glasses that Richard thought of as Gen X glasses even though Gen X must be an ancient term now. She was smiling, having a good time. She was in love with the young man who was shooting.

Their emotional openness, more than their hair or clothing, marked them as not from around here. Richard had come out of this place with the reserved, even hard-bitten style that it seemed to tattoo into its men. This had driven half a dozen girlfriends crazy until he had finally made some progress toward lifting it. But, when it was useful, he could drop it like a portcullis.

The young woman had turned toward him and thrust her pink gloves up in the air in a gesture that, from a man, meant "Touchdown!" and, from a woman, "I will hug you now!" Through a smile she was saying something to him, snapped into fragments as the earmuffs neutralized a series of nine-millimeter bangs.

Richard faltered.

A precursor of shock came over the girl's face as she realized *he isn't going to remember me*. But in that moment, and because of that look, Richard knew her. Genuine delight came into his face. "Sue!" he exclaimed, and then—for sometimes it paid to be the family genealogist—corrected himself: "Zula!" And then he stepped forward and hugged her carefully. Beneath the layers, she was boneslender, as always. Strong though. She pulled herself up on tiptoe to mash her cheek against his, and then let go and bounced back onto the heels of her huge insulated boots.

He knew everything, and nothing, about her. She must be in her middle twenties now. A couple of years out of college. When had he last seen her?

Probably not since she had been in college. Which meant that, during the handful of years that Richard had absentmindedly neglected to think about her, she had lived her entire life.

In those days, her look and her identity had not extended much beyond her backstory: an Eritrean orphan, plucked by a church mission from a refugee camp in the Sudan, adopted by Richard's sister, Patricia, and her husband, Bob, reorphaned when Bob went on the lam and Patricia died suddenly. Readopted by John and his wife, Alice, so that she could get through high school.

Richard was ransacking his extremely dim memories of John and Alice's last few Christmas letters, trying to piece together the rest. Zula had attended college not far away—Iowa State? Done something practical—an engineering degree. Gotten a job, moved somewhere.

"You're looking great!" he said, since it was time to say something, and this seemed harmless.

"So are you," she said.

He found this a little off-putting, since it was such transparent BS. Almost forty years ago, Richard and some of his friends had been bombing down a local road on some ridiculous teenaged quest and found themselves stuck behind a slow-driving farmer. One of them, probably with the assistance of drugs, had noticed a similarity—which, once pointed out, was undeniable—between Richard's wide, ruddy cliff of a face and the back end of the red pickup truck ahead of them. Thus the nickname Dodge. He kept wonder-

ing when he was going to develop the aquiline, silver-haired good looks of the men in the prostate medication ads on their endless seaplane junkets and fly-fishing idylls. Instead he was turning out to be an increasingly spready and mottled version of what he had been at thirty-five. Zula, on the other hand, actually was looking great. Black/Arab with an unmistakable dash of Italian. A spectacular nose that in other families and circumstances would have gone under the knife. But she'd figured out that it was beautiful with those big glasses perched on it. No one would mistake her for a model, but she'd found a look. He could only conjecture what style pheromones Zula was throwing off to her peers, but to him it was a sort of hyperspace-librarian, girl-geek thing that he found clever and fetching without attracting him in a way that would have been creepy.

"This is Peter," she announced, since her boyfriend had emptied the Glock's clip. Richard noted approvingly that he checked the weapon's chamber, ejected the clip, and checked the chamber again before transferring the gun to his left hand and extending his right to shake. "Peter, this is my uncle Richard." As Peter and Richard were shaking hands, Zula told Peter, "He lives pretty close to us, actually!"

"Seattle?" Peter asked.

"I have a condo there," Richard said, sounding lame and stiff to himself. He was mortified. His niece had been living in Seattle and he hadn't known. What would the re-u make of this? As a sort of excuse, he offered up: "But lately I've been spending more time at Elphinstone." Then he added, "B.C.," in case that meant nothing to Peter.

But an alert and interested look was already coming over Peter's face. "I've heard the snowboarding's great there!" Peter said.

"I wouldn't know," Richard said. "But everything else is pretty damned nice."

Zula was mortified too. "I'm sorry I didn't get in touch with you, Uncle Richard! It was on my list."

From most people this would have been mere polite cliché, but Richard knew that Zula would have an actual, literal list and that "Call Uncle Richard" would be somewhere on it.

"It's on me," he said. "I should have rolled out the welcome mat."

While stuffing more rounds into empty magazines, they caught up with each other. Zula had graduated from Iowa State with a dual degree in geology and computer science and had moved to Seattle four months ago to take a job at a geothermal energy start-up that was going to build a pilot plant near Mt. Rainier: the stupendous volcanic shotgun pointed at Seattle's head. She was going to do computer stuff: simulations of underground heat flow using computer codes. Richard was fascinated to hear the jargon rushing out of her mouth, to see the Zula brain unleashed on something worthy of its powers. In high school she'd been quiet, a little too assimilated, a little too easy to please in a small-town farm-girl sort of way. An all-American girl named Sue whose official documents happened to read Zula. But now she had got in touch with her Zula-ness.

"So what happened?" Richard asked. For she had been careful to say "I *was going*" to do this and that.

"When I got there, all was chaos," she said. The look on her face was fascinated. Going from Eritrea to Iowa would definitely give a young person some interesting perspectives on chaos. "Something funny was going on with the money people. One of those hedge fund Ponzi schemes. They filed for bankruptcy a month ago."

"You're unemployed," Richard said.

"That's one way to look at it, Uncle Richard." she said, and smiled.

Now Richard had a new item on *his* list, which, unlike Zula's, was a stew of nagging worries, vague intentions, and dimly perceived karmic debts that he carried around in his head. *Get Zula a job at Corporation 9592.* And he even had a plausible way of making it happen. That was not the hard part. The hard part was bestowing that favor on her without giving aid and comfort to any of the other job seekers at the re-u.

"What do you know about magma?" he asked.

She turned slightly, looked at him sidelong. "More than you, I would guess."

"You can do heat flow simulations. What about magma flow simulations?"

"The capability is out there," she said.

"Tensors?" Richard had no idea what a tensor was, but he had

noticed that when math geeks started throwing the word around, it meant that they were headed in the general direction of actually getting something done.

"I suppose," she said nervously, and he knew that his question had been ridiculous.

"It's really important, in a deep way, that we get it right."

"What, for your *game company*?"

"Yes, for my Fortune 500 game company."

She was frozen in the watchful sidelong pose, trying to make out if he was just pulling her leg.

"The stability of the world currency markets is at stake," he insisted.

She was not going to bite.

"We'll talk later. You know anyone with autism spectrum disorder?"

"Yes," she blurted out, staring at him directly now.

"Could you work with someone like that?"

Her eyes strayed to her boyfriend.

Peter was struggling with the reloading. He was trying to put the rounds into the magazine backward. This had really been bothering Richard for the last half minute or so. He was trying to think of a nonhumiliating way to mention this when Peter figured it out on his own and flipped the thing around in his hand.

Richard had assumed, based on how Peter handled the gun, that he'd done it before. Now he reconsidered. This might be the first time Peter had ever touched a semiautomatic. But he was a quick study. An autodidact. Anything that was technical, that was logical, that ran according to rules, Peter could figure out. And knew it. Didn't bother to ask for help. So much quicker to work it out on his own than suffer through someone's well-meaning efforts to educate him—and to forge an emotional connection with him in so doing. There was something, somewhere, that he could do better than most people. Something of a technical nature.

"What have you been doing, Uncle Richard?" Zula asked brightly. She might have gotten in touch with her Zula-ness, but she kept the Sue-ness holstered for ready use at times like this.

"*Waiting for cancer*" would have been too honest an answer. "*Fighting a bitter rear-guard action against clinical depression*" would

have given the impression that he was depressed *today,* which he wasn't.

"Worrying about palette drift," Richard said.

Peter and Zula seemed oddly satisfied with that nonanswer, as if it fit in perfectly with their expectations of men in their fifties. Or perhaps Zula had already told Peter everything that she knew, or suspected, about Richard, and they knew better than to pry.

"You fly through Seattle?" Peter asked, jumping rather hastily to the last-resort topic of air travel.

Richard shook his head. "I drove to Spokane. Takes three or four hours depending on snow and the wait at the border. One-hop to Minneapolis. Then I rented a big fat American car and drove it down here." He nodded in the direction of the road, where a maroon Mercury Grand Marquis was blotting out two houses of the Zodiac.

"This would be the place for it," Peter remarked. He turned his head around to take in a broad view of the farm, then glanced innocently at Richard.

Richard's reaction to this was more complicated than Peter might have imagined. He was gratified that Peter and Zula had identified him as one of the cool kids and were now inviting him to share their wryness. On the other hand, he had grown up on this farm, and part of him didn't much care for their attitude. He suspected that they were already facebooking and twittering this, that hipsters in San Francisco coffee bars were even now ROFLing and OMGing at photos of Peter with the Glock.

But then he heard the voice of a certain ex-girlfriend telling him he was too young to begin acting like such a crabby old man.

A second voice chimed in, reminding him that, when he had rented the colossal Grand Marquis in Minneapolis, he had done so *ironically.*

Richard's ex-girlfriends were long gone, but their voices followed him all the time and spoke to him, like Muses or Furies. It was like having seven superegos arranged in a firing squad before a single beleaguered id, making sure he didn't enjoy that last cigarette.

All this internal complexity must have come across, to Peter and Zula, as a sudden withdrawal from the conversation. Perhaps a precursor of senility. It was okay. The magazines were about as loaded

as you could get them with frozen fingers. Zula, then Richard, took turns firing the Glock. By the time they were done, the rate of fire, up and down the barbed-wire fence, had dropped almost to nothing. Ammunition was running low, people were cold, kids were complaining, guns needed to be cleaned. The camo chairs were being collapsed and tossed into the backs of the SUVs. Zula drifted over to exchange hugs and delighted, high-pitched chatter with some of her cousins. Richard stooped down, which was a little more difficult than it used to be, and started to collect empty shotgun shells. In the corner of his eye he saw Peter following his lead. But Peter gave up on the chore quickly, because he didn't want to stray far from Zula. He had no interest in social chitchat with Zula's retinue of cousins, but neither did he want to leave her alone. He was swivel-headedly alert and protective of her in a way that Richard both admired and resented. Richard wasn't above feeling ever so slightly jealous of the fact that Peter had appointed himself Zula's protector.

Peter glanced across the field at the house, looked away for a moment, then turned back to give it a thorough examination.

He knew. Zula had told him about what happened to her adopted mom. Peter had probably googled it. He probably knew that there were fifty to sixty lightning-related fatalities a year and that it was hard for Zula to talk about because most people thought it was such a weird way to die, thought she might even be joking.

THE GRAND MARQUIS was blocking an SUV full of kids and moms who had just had it with being out there in the noise and the cold, so Richard—glad of an excuse to leave—moved quickly toward it, passing between Peter and Zula. Not too loudly, he announced, "I'm going into town," which meant that he was going to Walmart. He got into the huge Mercury, heard doors opening behind him, saw Peter and Zula sliding into the plunging sofa of the backseat. The passenger door swung open too, and in came another twentysomething woman whose name Richard should have known but couldn't recall. He would have to ferret it out during the drive.

The young funsters had much to say about the Grand Marquis as he was gunning it out onto the road; they had got the joke of it, decided that Richard was hip. The girl in the passenger seat said she

had never before been in "a car like this," meaning, apparently, a sedan. Richard felt far beyond merely old.

Their conversation flew back and forth like the twittering of birds for about five minutes, and then they all fell silent. Peter was not exactly chomping at the bit to divulge facts about himself. Richard was fine with that. People who had job titles and business cards could say easily where they worked and what they did for a living, but those who worked for themselves, doing things of a complicated nature, learned over time that it was not worth the trouble of supplying an explanation if its only purpose was to make small talk. Better to just go directly to airline travel.

Their chilly extremities sucked all the energy from their brains. They gazed out the windows at the frost-burned landscape. This was western Iowa. People from anywhere else, traveling across the state, would have been hard-pressed to see any distinction between its east and its west—or, for that matter, between Ohio and South Dakota. But having grown up here, and gone on many a pirate quest and Indian ambush down along the crick, Richard sensed a gradient in the territory, was convinced that they were on the threshold between the Midwest and the West, as though on one side of the crick you were in the land of raking red leaves across the moist, forgiving black soil while listening to Big Ten football games on the transistor radio, but on the other side you were plucking arrows out of your hat.

There was a north-south gradient too. To the south were Missouri and Kansas, whence this branch of the Forthrasts (according to his research) had come around the time of the Civil War to get away from the terrorists and the death squads. To the north—hard to miss on a day like today—you could almost see the shoulder of the world turning inward toward the Pole. Those north-seeking Forthrasts must have thought better of it when they had ascended to this latitude and felt the cold air groping down the necks of their coats and frisking them, and so here they'd stopped and put down roots, not in the way that the old black walnut trees along the crick had roots, but as blackberries and dandelions grow thick when a lucky seed lands and catches on a stretch of unwatched ground.

The Walmart was like a starship that had landed in the soybean fields. Richard drove past the part of it where food was sold, past the

pharmacy and the eye care center, and parked at the end where they stocked merchandise. The parking spaces were platted for full-sized pickup trucks, a detail useful to him now.

They went inside. The young ones shuffled to a stop as their ironic sensibilities, which served them in lieu of souls, were jammed by a signal of overwhelming power. Richard kept moving, since he was the one with a mission. He'd seen a way to contribute to the re-u without stepping in, or turning an ankle on, any of the cow pies strewn so intricately across his path.

He kept walking until everything in his field of vision was camouflage or fluorescent orange, then looked around for the ammunition counter. An elderly man came out wearing a blue vest and rested his wrinkly hands on the glass like an Old West barkeeper. Richard nodded at the man's pro forma greeting and then announced that he wanted three large boxes of the 5.56-millimeter NATO cartridges. The man nodded and turned around to unlock the glass case where the good stuff was stockpiled. On the back of his vest was a large yellow smiley face that was thrust out and made almost hemispherical by his widower's hump.

"Len was handing it out three rounds at a time," he explained to the others, as they caught up with him. "Everyone wants to fire his carbine, but no one buys ammo—and 5.56 is kind of expensive these days because all the nut jobs are convinced it's going to be banned."

The clerk set the heavy boxes carefully on the glass counter, drew a pistol-shaped barcode scanner from its plastic holster, and zapped each of the three boxes in turn: three pulls of the trigger, three direct hits. He quoted an impressively high figure. Richard already had his wallet out. When he opened it up, the niece or second cousin (he still hadn't contrived a way to get her name) glanced into the valley of nice leather so indiscreetly that he was tempted to just hand the whole thing over to her. She was astonished to see the face of Queen Elizabeth and colorful pictures of hockey players and doughboys. He hadn't thought to change money, and now he was in a place with no bureaux de change. He paid with a debit card.

"When did you move to Canada?" asked the young woman.

"1972," he answered.

The old man gave him a look over his bifocals: *Draft dodger!*

None of the younger people made the connection. He wondered

if they even knew that the country had once had a draft, and that people had been at pains to avoid it.

"Just need your PIN number, Mr. Forrest," said the clerk.

Richard, like many who'd moved away, pronounced his name forTHRAST, but he answered to FORthrast, which was how everyone here said it. He even recognized "Forrest," which was what the name would probably erode into pretty soon, if the family didn't up stakes.

By the time they'd made it to the exit, he'd decided that the Walmart was not so much a starship as an interdimensional portal to every other Walmart in the known universe, and that when they walked out the doors past the greeters they might find themselves in Pocatello or Wichita. But as it turned out they were still in Iowa.

"Why'd you move up there?" asked the girl on the drive back. She was profoundly affected by the nasal, singsongy speech pathology that was so common to girls in her cohort and that Zula had made great strides toward getting rid of.

Richard checked the rearview mirror and saw Peter and Zula exchanging a significant glance.

Girl, haven't you heard of Wikipedia!?

Instead of telling her why he'd moved, he told her what he'd done when he'd gotten there: "I worked as a guide."

"Like a hunting guide?"

"No, I'm not a hunter."

"I was wondering why you knew so much about guns."

"Because I grew up here," he explained. "And in Canada some of us carried them on the job. It's harder to own guns there. You have to take special courses, belong to a gun club and so on."

"Why'd you carry them on the job . . ."

" . . . if I wasn't a hunting guide?"

"Yeah."

"Grizzlies."

"Oh, like in case one of them attacked you?"

"That's correct."

"You could, like, shoot in the air and scare it off?"

"In the heart and kill it."

"Did that ever happen?"

Richard checked the rearview again, hoping to make eye con-

tact and send the telepathic message *For God's sake, will someone back there rescue me from this conversation,* but Peter and Zula merely looked interested.

"Yes," Richard said. He was tempted to lie. But this was the re-u. It would out.

"The bear rug in Grandpa's den," Zula explained from the back.

"That's real!?" asked the girl.

"Of course it's real, Vicki! What did you think it was, polyester!?"

"You killed that bear, Uncle Dick?"

"I fired two slugs into its body while my client was rediscovering long-forgotten tree-climbing skills. Not long after, its heart stopped beating."

"And then you skinned it?"

No, it politely climbed out of its own pelt before giving up the ghost. Richard was finding it more and more difficult to resist firing off snappy rejoinders. Only the Furious Muses were holding him at bay.

"I carried it on my back across the United States border," Richard heard himself explaining. "With the skull and everything, it weighed about half as much as I did at that age."

"Why'd you do that?"

"Because it was illegal. Not shooting the bear. That's okay, if it's self-defense. But then you're supposed to turn it over to the authorities."

"Why?"

"Because," said Peter, figuring it out, "otherwise, people would just go out and kill bears. They would claim it was self-defense and keep the trophies."

"How far was it?"

"Two hundred miles."

"You must have wanted it pretty bad!"

"I didn't."

"Why did you carry it on your back two hundred miles then?"

"Because the client wanted it."

"I'm confused!" Vicki complained, as if her emotional state were really the important thing here. "You did that just for the client?"

"It's the opposite of that!" Zula said, slightly indignant.

Peter said, "Wait a sec. The bear attacked you and your client—"

"I'll tell the story!" Richard announced, holding up a hand. He

didn't want it told, wished it hadn't come up in the first place. But it was the only story he had about himself that he could tell in decent company, and if it were going to be told, he wanted to do it himself. "The client's dog started it. Hassled the poor bear. The bear picked the dog up in its jaws and started shaking it like a squirrel."

"Was it like a poodle or something?" Vicki asked.

"It was an eighty-pound golden lab," Richard said.

"Ohmygod!"

"That is kind of what I was saying. When the lab stopped struggling, which didn't take long, the bear tossed it into the bushes and advanced on us like *If you had anything whatsoever to do with that fucking dog, you're dead*. That's when the shooting happened."

Peter snorted at this choice of phrase.

"There was no bravery involved, if that's what you're thinking. There was only one climbable tree. The client was not setting any speed records getting up it. We couldn't both climb it at the same time, is all I'm saying. And not even a horse can outrun a grizzly. I was just standing there with a slug gun. What was I going to do?"

Silence, as they considered the rhetorical question.

"Slug gun?" Zula asked, dropping into engineer mode.

"A twelve-gauge shotgun loaded with slugs rather than shells. Optimized for this one purpose. Two barrels, side by side: an Elmer Fudd special. So I went down on one knee because I was shaking so badly and emptied it into the bear. The bear ran away and died a few hundred yards from our camp. We went and found the carcass. The client wanted the skin. I told him it was illegal. He offered me money to do this thing for him. So I started skinning it. This took *days*. A *horrible* job. Butchering even domesticated, farm-bred animals is pretty unspeakable, which is why we bring Mexicans to Iowa to do it," said Richard, warming to the task, "but a bear is worse. It's gamy." This word had no punch at all. It was one of those words that everyone had heard but no one knew really what it meant. "It has almost a fishy smell to it. It's like you're being just steeped in the thing's hormones."

Vicki shuddered. He considered getting into detail about the physical dimensions of a grizzly bear's testicles, but, judging from her body language, he'd already driven the point home firmly enough.

Actually, he had been tempted to rush the job of skinning the grizzly. But the problem was that he started with the claws. And

he remembered from his boyhood reading about the Lakota braves taking the claws off after they'd killed the bear as a rite of manhood, making them into a necklace. Boys of his vintage took that stuff seriously; he knew as much about Crazy Horse as a man of an earlier generation might have known about Caesar. So he felt compelled to go about the job in a sacred way. Having begun it thus, he could not find the right moment to switch into rough butchery mode.

"The more time I spent—the deeper I got into it—the more I didn't want the client to have it," Richard continued. "He wanted it so badly. I was down there covered in gore, fighting off yellow jackets, and he'd mosey down from camp and size it up, you know. I could see him visualizing it on the floor of his office or his den. Broker from New York. I just knew he would tell lies about it—use it to impress people. Claim he'd bagged it himself while his chickenshit guide climbed a tree. We got to arguing. Stupid of me because I was already deep into the illegality of it. I'd placed myself in a totally vulnerable position. He threatened to turn me in, get me fired, if I didn't give him the trophy. So I said fuck you and just walked away with it. Left him with the keys to the truck so he could get home."

Silence.

"I didn't even really want it that badly," Richard insisted. "I just couldn't let him take it home and tell lies about it."

"Did he get you fired?"

"Yes. Got me in trouble too. Got my license revoked."

"What'd you do after you lost your job?"

Put my newfound skills to work carrying backloads of marijuana across the border.

"This and that."

"Mmm. Well, I hope it was worth it."

Oh Christ, yes.

They reached the farm. The driveway was full of SUVs, so Richard, pulling rank as one who had grown up on this property, parked the Grand Marquis on the dead grass of the side yard.

THE VEHICLE RODE so low that getting out of it was like climbing out of one's own grave. As they did so, Richard caught Peter scanning the place, trying to identify where the fatal clothesline had stood.

Richard thought about becoming Peter's Virgil, giving the poor kid a break by flatly explaining all the stuff he'd eventually have to piece together on his own, if he and Zula stayed together. He did not actually do it, but the words he'd speak had been loosed in his mind. If there was such a thing as a mind's eye, then his mind's mouth had started talking.

He cast his eye over a slight bulge in the ground surrounded by a ring of frostbitten toadstools, like a boil striving to erupt through the lawn from some underlying Grimm brothers stratum. *That's what's left of the oak tree. The clothesline ran from it to the side of the house—just there, beside the chimney, you can see the bracket. Mom was upstairs dying. The nature of what ailed her created a need for frequent changes of bed linens. I offered to drive into town and buy more sheets at J.C. Penney—this was pre-Walmart. Patricia was affronted. As if this were me accusing her of being a bad daughter. A load of sheets was finished, but the dryer was still busy, so she hung them up on the clothesline. It was one of those days when you could tell that a storm was coming. We were up there sitting around Mom's bed in midafternoon singing hymns, and we heard the thunder rolling across the prairie like billiard balls. Pat went downstairs to take the sheets off the line before the rain came. We all heard the bolt that killed her. Sounded like ten sticks of dynamite going off right outside the window. It hit the tree and traveled down the clothesline and right down her arm through her heart to the ground. Power went out, Mom woke up, things were confused for a minute or two. Finally Jake happened to look out the window and saw Pat down in the grass, already with a sheet on her. We never told Mom that her daughter was dead. Would have made for some awkward explaining. She lost consciousness later that day and died three days after that. We buried them together.*

Just rehearsing it in his mind left Richard shaking his head in amazement. It was hard to believe, even here, where the weather killed people all the time. People couldn't hear the story told without making some remark or even laughing in spite of themselves. Richard had thought, for a while, of founding an Internet support group for siblings of people killed by lightning. The whole story was like something from a literary novel out of Iowa City, had the family produced a writer, or the tale come to the notice of some wandering Hawkeye bard. But as it was, the story was Zula's property, and he would give Zula the choice of when and whether and how to tell it.

She, thank God, had been away at Girl Scout camp, and so they'd been able to bring her home and tell her, under controlled conditions, with child psychologists in the room, that she'd been orphaned for the second time at eleven.

A few months later Bob, Patricia's ex-husband, had popped his head up out of whatever hole he lived in and made a weak bid to interfere with John and Alice's adoption of Zula. Then, just as suddenly, he had dropped out of the picture.

Zula had passed through teenagerhood in this house, as a ward of John and Alice, and had come out strangely fine. Richard had read in an article somewhere that even kids who came from really fucked-up backgrounds actually turned out pretty good if some older person took them under their wing at just the right point in their early adolescence, and he reckoned that Zula must have squirted through this loophole. In the four years between the adoption and the lightning strike, something had passed from Patricia to Zula, something that had made all the rest of it okay.

Richard had failed to mate and Jake, the kid brother, had become what he'd become: a process that had started not long after he'd looked down out of that window to see his dead sister wound up in a smoldering sheet. These accidents of death and demographics had left Alice not only as the matriarch but as the only adult female Forthrast. She and John had four children, but precisely because they'd done such an excellent job raising them, these had all moved away to do important things in big cities (it being the permanent, ongoing tragedy of Iowa that her well-brought-up young were obliged to flee the state in order to find employment worthy of their qualities). This, combined with her perception of a Richard-Jake axis of irresponsible malehood, had created a semipermanent feeling of male-female grievance, a kind of slow-motion trench warfare. Alice was the field marshal of one side. Her strategy was to work the outer reaches of the family tree. John helped, wittingly or not, with things like the firearms practice, which made coming here less unattractive to distantly related males. But the real work of the re-u, as Richard had only belatedly come to understand, took place in the kitchen and had nothing to do with food preparation.

Which didn't mean that the men couldn't get a few things done of their own.

Richard made a detour over to Len's Subaru and left the boxes of cartridges on the driver's seat. Then into the farmhouse by its rarely used front door, which led him into the rarely used parlor, crowded today. But more than half of the shooters had gone back to the motel to rest and clean up, so he was able to move around. A cousin offered to take his ski parka and hang it up. Richard politely declined, then patted the breast pocket to verify that the packets were still there, the zipper still secured.

Five young cousins ("cousins" being the generic term for anyone under about forty) were draped over sofas and recliners, prodding their laptops, downloading and swapping pictures. Torrents of glowing, crystalline photos rushed across their screens, making a funny and sad contrast with the dozen or so family photographs, developed and printed through the medieval complexities of chemical photography, laboriously framed, and hung on the walls of the room.

The word "Jake" caught his ear, and he turned to see some older cousins looking at a framed photo of Jake and his brood, about a year out of date. The photo was disorientingly normal-looking, as if Jake could comfortably flout every other convention of modern American life but would never dream of failing to have such a picture taken of him and Elizabeth and the three boys. Shot, perhaps, by some other member of their rustic church who had a knack for such things, and framed in a birchbark contraption that one of the boys had made himself. They looked pretty normal, and signs of the true Jake were only detectable in some of the minutiae such as his Confederate infantryman's beard.

A woman asked why Jake and his family never came to the re-u.

Richard had learned the hard way that when the topic of Jake came up, he needed to get out in front of it fast and do everything he could to portray his kid brother as a reasonable guy, or else someone else would denounce him as a nut job and it would lead to awkwardness. "Since 9/11, Jake doesn't believe in flying because you have to show ID," Richard said. "He thinks it's unconstitutional."

"Does he ever drive back here?" asked a male in-law, cautiously interested, verging on amused.

"He doesn't believe in having a driver's license either."

"But he has to drive, right?" asked the woman who'd started it. "Someone told me he was a carpenter."

"In the part of Idaho where he's moving around, he can get away without having a driver's license," Richard said. "He has an understanding with the sheriff that doesn't translate so well to other parts of the country."

He didn't even bother telling people about Jake's refusal to put license plates on his truck.

Richard made a quick raid on the outskirts of the kitchen, grabbing a couple of cookies and giving the women something to talk about. Then he headed for what had, in his boyhood, been the back porch and what had latterly been converted into a ground-level nursing-facility-slash-man-cave for his father.

Dad, legal name Nicholas Forthrast, known to the re-u as Grandpa, currently aged ninety-nine, was enthroned on a recliner in a room whose most conspicuous feature, to most of those who walked into it, was the bearskin rug. Richard could practically smell the aforementioned hormones boiling off it. During the porch conversion project of 2002, that rug was the first thing that Alice had moved out here. As symbol of ancient Forthrast manly virtues, it competed with Dad's Congressional Medal of Honor, framed and hung on the wall not far from the recliner. An oxygen tank of impressive size stood in the corner, competing for floor space and electrical outlets with a dialysis machine. A very old console television, mounted in a walnut cabinet, served as inert plinth for a fifty-four-inch plasma display now showing a professional football game with the sound turned down. Flying copilot in a somewhat less prepossessing recliner to Dad's right hand was John, six years older than Richard, and the family's acting patriarch. Some cousins were sitting cross-legged on the bearskin or the underlying carpet, rapt on the game. One of the Cardenas sisters (he thought it was most likely Rosie) was bustling around behind the recliners, jotting down numbers on a clipboard, folding linens—showing clear signs, in other words, that she was about to hand Dad off to John so that she could head off to her own family's Thanksgiving observances.

Since Dad had acquired all these accessory parts—the external kidney, the external lung—he had become a rather complicated piece of machinery, like a high-end TIG welder, that could not be operated by just anyone. John, who had come back from Vietnam with bilateral below-the-knee amputations, was more than comfort-

able with prosthetic technology; he had read all the manuals and understood the functions of most of the knobs, so he could take over responsibility for the machines at times like this. If Richard were left alone with him in the house, however, Dad would be dead in twelve hours. Richard had to contribute in ways less easily described. He loitered with hands in pockets, pretending to watch the football game, until Rosie made a positive move for the exit. He followed her out the door a moment later and caught up with her on the wheelchair ramp that led down to Dad's Dr. Seuss–like wheelchair-lift-equipped van. "I'll walk you to your car," he announced, and she grinned sweetly at his euphemistic ways. "Turkey this afternoon?" he asked.

"Turkey and football," she said. "Our kind of football."

"How's Carmelita?"

"Well, thank you. Her son—tall! Basketball player."

"No football?"

She smiled. "A little. He head the ball very well." She pulled her key chain out of her purse, and Richard got a quick whiff of all the fragrant things she kept in there. He lunged out ahead of her and opened the driver's-side door of her Subaru. "Thank you."

"Thank *you* very much, Rosie," he said, unzipping the breast pocket of his parka. As she was settling into the driver's seat, smoothing her skirt under her bottom, he pulled out a manila envelope containing a half-inch-thick stack of hundred-dollar bills and slipped it into the little compartment in the side of the door. Then he closed the door gently. She rolled the window down. "That is the same as last year, plus ten percent," he explained. "Is it still suitable? Still good for you and Carmelita?"

"It is fine, thank you very much!" she said.

"Thank *you*," he insisted. "You are a blessing to our family, and we value you very much. You have my number if there is ever a problem."

"Happy Thanksgiving."

"Same to you and all the Cardenases."

She waved, put the Subaru in gear, and pulled away.

Richard patted his jacket again, checking the other packet. He would find some way to slip it to John later; it would pay for a lot of oxygen.