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Out Cold

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Out Cold

Abstract
Walter had just completed his five-mile route on the treadmill and was headed from the gym to his car in a nearby parking lot - he was in fact circumnavigating a field on which a few idiotic teenagers were kicking a soccer ball at a field hockey goal, so as not to approach near their game - when he was struck in the side and back of his head by something large and forceful and solid and round, and it sent his glasses flying from his face and his bright white tennis cap skittering from his head and it flattened him on his back on the grass. God damn. He felt for a moment as if he had been shot by an extremely large bullet in the shape of... in the shape of a ball. [excerpt]

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alter had just completed his five-mile route on the treadmill and was headed from the gym to his car in a nearby parking lot—he was in fact circumnavigating a field on which a few idiotic teenagers were kicking a soccer ball at a field hockey goal, so as not to approach near their game—when he was struck in the side and back of his head by something large and forceful and solid and round, and it sent his glasses flying from his face and his bright white tennis cap skittering from his head and it flattened him on his back on the grass. God damn. He felt for a moment as if he had been shot by an extremely large bullet in the shape of . . . in the shape of a ball. And then as he lay there, he conjectured that it had indeed been a ball, most likely a soccer ball, but the boys were playing to his right and he had been attacked from the left. He lay there, trying to imagine standing and yet not daring to stand. He had to catch his breath, as if he had just finished exercising all over again. He had taxes to do this weekend and a mountain of work to get through beyond that. Surely he hadn’t just suffered another concussion. And what the hell had just happened here? Had he really been attacked? That seemed far-fetched. In his cap and sweat suit he ought to be unrecognizable. Perhaps he had been mistaken for someone else? Try to get up, he urged himself. He lay there and could not get up or did not want to yet try to get up, he couldn’t tell which.

“Sir, are you all right? Sir?”

There was a boy standing to his left, and behind him was the late afternoon sun. He had a strange, enticing accent. Walter tried to see him. He was from Africa! Walter slowly rolled, struggled to his knees, and stood.

“I’m sorry, sir,” the young man said. He was perhaps seventeen or eighteen or nineteen or twenty.

Suddenly Walter was furious. “Why did you hit me with the ball?”

“I didn’t see you, sir.”
“What’s your name?” Walter demanded, as he gathered up his clip-ons and glasses—now in several pieces—and put his cap gingerly back on his head, all while trying to keep the kid from seeing how badly his hands were shaking. He noticed the other three soccer boys had arrived as well, but since none of them had spoken he couldn’t tell what continent they were from and he could not—due to the sun—tell the color of their skin.

“Ibrihima,” the young man said.

“Ibrihima?” Walter said.

“Ibrihima.”

“Spell it.”

“I-b-h-r-h-m-a,” the young man said.

Walter wanted to nail it to his brain. “Spell it again,” he said.

“I-b-h-r-h-m-a.”

“You live around here?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You’ll be hearing from me.”

Walter started to walk to his car, over there in the lot, encased in waning but stunning sunlight. As he neared his car, he passed close to Ibhrhma again.

“I’m really sorry, sir,” Ibhrhma said.

“Uh-huh,” Walter said, and strode by him with what he hoped was a withering look.

When he drove, carefully, from the lot, he eyed Ibhrhma with his friends, no longer playing but huddled close as if trying to figure out what the grumpy old guy would do next. He was only forty-five, for god’s sake. Forty-six, after the weekend. God, there was a lot going on this weekend. Well, let the boys worry. It’d be good for them.

As he neared the first stop sign he realized he should probably not be driving. A number of people were out and about, couples with strollers, men and women just getting released from work, probably some people who knew him and did not like him, and while now would be the rare time to get away with hitting any of them, he really shouldn’t. I-b-h-r-h-m-a. Where were the vowels? There really needed to be more vowels, but he wasn’t going to contact him anyway. He just wanted to make him think twice about kicking a soccer ball without looking, kicking a soccer ball on a hockey field, kicking a soccer ball from well out of bounds onto the field in question. How could he not have seen him? The sun. The sun
was devastating. A car honked. Walter looked up. He was still at the stop sign, but the sun wasn’t in his eyes anymore. He crossed the intersection. Up ahead was a stoplight. Lights were easier. And then there’d be a curve, a right turn, and at the end of the block he’d be home. And that would be it for driving today. On his face his glasses seemed to shift like unsettled tectonic plates. He’d held them together with the spring-loaded clip-ons. Some of his few friends ridiculed him about the clip-ons. Clip-ons, they said. Get real. He liked his clip-ons. He had very poor sight and those all-in-one lenses always stayed dark.

He was home. Evidently he’d made all the turns. The clock in the car said he was only two minutes late. He unfolded himself limb by limb from the car. If his enemies could only reach him now, he’d be crushed under their heels. The back of his head where he’d been smashed felt like it wasn’t there, as if it had been supplanted by a netting that stretched itself too tightly toward the uninjured parts of his skull. He went up the steps from the garage and navigated the cluttered breezeway to the kitchen.

Already he had felt the pathetic impulse to burst into tears several times, and he was not going to give in to it now.

“Hi,” Claire said, not bothering to look up from an envelope she was opening or closing, obviously ticked that he’d overstepped in their scheduled-down-to-the-minute lives.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” he said. “I got hit by a soccer ball on the way back to the car.” His hand shook again as he took off his glasses. “Do you think you could please try to fix these.”

“Are you all right?” Claire asked.

“I’m sure I’m fine,” he said.

“Maybe we should stay in,” she said hopefully. She looked at him closely. So that was it: he did recall they had a work-related event in just a few minutes and then dinner at the house of another family, and she was looking for an out.

“Oh, we’re going,” he said firmly. “Where are the kids?”

“Christopher is off hiding because he doesn’t want to go, and David has eaten his dinner and is all set. Grace is out at a friend’s.” As she often was these days.
Without a word, he went upstairs and got in the shower, then gave up trying to determine whether they really did have to go or he was just saying they did to spite Claire. Instead, he recounted to himself all the stuff he knew from his last concussion—stay awake, don’t lift anything heavy (including the children), don’t lie down. Don’t have any important conversations. Go light on the alcohol, too, especially if it isn’t agreeing with you. The last time he had something like this and he drank, it was like giving himself altitude sickness even though he was at sea level. He’d had a double concussion during a game of tag, struck out of nowhere by a hanging bridge on a playground jungle gym set. There was one subdural hematoma on his forehead, from when he hit the bridge, and another one on the back of his head, from when he hit the ground. He’d been forbidden from flying for six weeks. He’d had to take extensive notes immediately after every business conversation so that he could remember what had been said. It had taken half a year before he felt like himself again, half a year before he could tell that people were no longer taking advantage of him. This time he could sense it wasn’t so bad. A minor concussion, at most. He’d had, what—eight, twelve concussions, starting at the age of one, when he cracked his head on the brick apron of his grandmother’s fireplace. Claire often said he was a candidate for early Alzheimer’s. He got dressed and took the stairs down to the kitchen with more than his normal care.

“I don’t want to go!” Christopher was sniffling and exclaiming on the floor, slamming a Transformer again and again against the Italian tile. Claire looked on, exasperated. “I really don’t want to go!”

“You fixed my glasses!” Walter noted happily.

“Are you sure we shouldn’t call a doctor?” She narrowed her eyes as if that would help her see him better.

“He’ll only tell me to take it easy,” Walter said. “There’s not much to be done short of drilling my skull, and I don’t think this will amount to that.”

“I AM NOT GOING!” Christopher said.

“He’s not going,” Claire said simply.

“One of us has to go,” Walter said.

“You go,” Claire said.

“You go,” Walter said. He knew of at least one person who’d be present whose promotion they had declined, and he for one wasn’t up to the tense, unfrightened looks he would have to exchange. Maybe he and Claire never should have gone into business together, maybe that was it.
“I want to go,” David said sullenly. He was dressed in his better clothes and his hair was meticulously combed. He was eleven and he knew there’d be cookies. Besides, he was kind of into art. Maybe they never should have worked at the same company, maybe that was what had triggered it all.

“Just take him,” Claire said. “And be back by five of six because we told the Wassmans six. Okay?”

“Okay,” Walter said. “Come on, David.”

They sat in the car in the garage waiting for him to start it. He was waiting for himself to start the car. Was it that he didn’t want to go or that he couldn’t go? Now was no time to be a coward.

“Dad?” David said.

David was an awkward eleven; he ate only sweets, chicken tenders, tortellini, hot dogs, and very plain pasta. Bananas were his only fruit, and carrots—cold—were his only vegetable. He owned a Wii, a Sony Playsta-
tion 2, a PSP, and a Gameboy Advance, but he still didn’t have an Xbox 360 and some days this void would enrage him to tears, and Walter would blame Claire and Claire would tear into Walter about how he resented their children having a better childhood than he’d had, and they would storm around the kitchen until they finally had shut each other up. The fact was the kid was spoiled and manipulative and depressed. He had asked several girls out but none had yet said yes. A report from the school nurse provided his percent of body fat and indicated he was overweight. Just last year he taught himself instantly how to ride a bike because he’d been promised a new one, and they’d bought him a $350 bike that he had ridden five times since. He had a kitten named Porridge, who didn’t like the litter box and required an extravagant contraption. Was that his old hockey stick in the rafters?

“Daddy?” David said.

They were still in the garage, but boy he was keeping a lot of things straight.

“I’m sorry,” Walter heard himself say, and made to turn to David in the back seat, but the gesture felt as elaborate as operating a road construction vehicle. He kept staring at the garage wall in front of him. Man, there were a lot of things piled up there, caved-in UPS boxes and discarded bicycle helmets and a red tent Claire had bought for the boys but had never used, just all this crap she’d obtained for the kids like snow shoes and ski suits and a stack of sleds and even snow shoe poles, a red wagon and a battery-powered red kids’ jeep and an air hockey table that had been disassembled,
its four-legged foundation tilting at the top of a hill of stuff and its white oval table leaned against a window sporting a jagged hole. She'd decided some years ago that the children were suffering from a toy deficit, and it seemed to him that, since then, they each got two or three things a week (some of them with ten or fifty or a hundred parts) and you couldn't navigate any of their rooms for all the stuff they had. Walter’s own parents had hauled him along on camping trips for his first fifteen summers, summers of pit toilets and mosquito bites, and he swore he'd never, never, never!

“I’m sorry,” he said to David. “You have to get out of the car. Tell your mother I’ll call her from the hospital.”

He looked in the rearview mirror half expecting to see the ghost of his own father, ready to remind him of all he had done for him that Walter had failed to appreciate. David stumbled from the car and presumably went back to the house. If he waited too long Claire would come out and stop him. If he waited too long the cacophony in his head would start up all over again. He didn’t want a whole production. He wanted to get there, be told what he already knew, and get home. There’d be some waiting involved, but right now he was still waiting for himself to start the car! He twisted the key, and the stiffness from his neck seemed to ease—perhaps it was even vanishing—and he got the car out of the garage and headed in the right direction at the right speed. It was probably just adrenaline, like in those stories you heard of mothers lifting cars that had fallen off their jacks to remove babies trapped underneath. Why were the stories always about mothers and what the hell were the babies doing so close to the cars anyway?

“Are you okay, sir?”

He turned sharply but there was no one in the car with him and all the windows were shut. And the radio was off.

“I’m very sorry, sir.”

“You’ll be hearing from me,” he said out loud.

That seemed to stop everything, but the car was still going and there was his first stop sign. He felt himself beginning to wonder whether this excursion was going to work out. He was not letting her take him and he was not taking an ambulance and it was just too far to walk and in the town where they lived—a town, say, not the size of yours—there were no

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**What if he had suffered the head injury right when he was on the verge of figuring something out?**
taxis or buses. It was really the wrong-sized town for something like this, though it could be a very pleasant town, and he'd long ago given up trying to persuade Claire that they should move.

He was nearing the hospital. It was amazing how quickly distance passed when you were moving. There was a stop sign, two long blocks, the turn into the ER driveway, and then the annoying decision of where to park. The town had a thing about parking tickets, and even though they were cheap—eight bucks if paid within twenty-four hours—boy did they add up. Not quite as bad as Bethany Beach, where they'd vacationed last summer with friends who had since moved away and where you could rack up a hundred bucks in tickets in just a few hours if you were stupid and didn't have any quarters. They had a system there that was a system, all right.

He wondered what he'd been thinking about right before he'd been struck by the ball. Before that, he'd been running on a treadmill watching the news about the war, so probably he'd been thinking about work or home or what a fraud he was in life in general. What if he had suffered the head injury right when he was on the verge of figuring out something? That would be terrible but somehow understandable.

There was nothing like the hydraulic whoosh of the opening and closing of the authentic hospital doors, whether they sucked you into all the sound and smell and paperwork and dreary morbidity of the place or rocketed you out to a shiny new world where the sun shone even if it was cloudy and even in your clip-ons you looked like some sparkling, sunglassed movie star with that clean new bill of health tucked into your back pocket. Was there a better feeling than getting a healthy discharge from a hospital? It was right up there with finishing your taxes or climbing from the nearly horizontal chair at the dentist's. This was some fucking adventure I-b-h-r-h-m-a had sent him on.

"I believe I've had a minor concussion," Walter told the woman behind the Plexiglas at the registration window.

She slid him a clipboard topped with a form. "Do you think you can fill this out?"

"Sure," he said, though as he looked at it while walking toward a seat, the checkboxes and blank lines and numbers all began to swim. What
a goddamn mess. And he was still contemplating how carefully he’d
couched his one sentence. Had he done the best with it he could? There
was something about “believe” that made it all sound right, but now he
wasn’t so sure it didn’t make the whole event sound like a product of his
imagination. God he hated thinking like this. He hoped it would all end
very soon.

Next to his seat was a magazine planted face down as if abandoned in
disgust. He flipped it over. Being—a Magazine for Real People. A blank outline
of a head stared out at him, with INSERT YOURSELF HERE written
across it. He turned a few pages and landed on a piece called “The Solips-
sistic Dark.”

Some failures I know: my honesty, my sobriety, my patience, my loyalty. Why is it that
no one trusts anyone anymore?

He shut the cover over it. Whew. That was already enough. And read-
ing was painful anyway.

“Walter,” the receptionist called from her window. “You can go on in
now.”

“I haven’t finished with the forms,” he said.

“Just sign the release and take the rest in with you, okay?”

“Okay,” he said. He signed the release and handed it to her and she hit
a button somewhere and the double doors to the actual ER swung open.
They miraculously did not collide with the woman on the other side.

“Walter, I’m Nora Heller. Can you follow me?”

He followed her without getting a glimpse of her face. She was slightly
taller than Walter, wearing a blue cardigan over her whites. There were
people sitting at desks but no one in any of the bays. She led him to the
dead middle of a row of five and instructed him to sit on the side of the
bed, then withdrew, closing the curtains around him. When he looked
down he saw he’d attached the magazine to his clipboard.

“Good God,” he said.

He unclipped it and dropped it on the nightstand. He looked at the
sis? Allergic to Any Medicines? It was all No, No, No, and there were so
many capital letters it was like he was reading German. He replaced the
clipboard with the magazine and thumbed it.

Oh, where the inner eye lands when the actual eye has no place to go! Our bodies start
dying at the age of twenty-one and we spend our whole lives trying to give birth to shit. Every
day we all want and need something new to justify and revitalize our existence.
Existence? This was obviously the same column or whatever it was, and any normal person would just stop at a word like that.

What do you wish upon a falling star or a lighted cake pressed before you that you must extinguish?

In a place and time where celebrity and wealth are the only meaningful attributes, where what is considered achievement can only be affirmed by arrival at fame and fortune, no consensus has been reached at what is the satisfactory life. If you Google yourself and find nothing, does that mean you don’t exist?

He put the magazine on a nearby chair—he certainly didn’t want it on his bed—and tried the form again.

“Are you decent?” a man called from outside the curtain. Before Walter could answer, the curtain swung open, and a tall blond man with a receding hairline dented by stingly positioned reading glasses entered and snapped the curtain shut again. “I’m Dr. Cummins,” he said, and shook Walter’s hand. “You think you had a concussion. What happened?”

Walter explained his accident.

“Soccer balls can do that,” the doctor said, smiling slightly, “and the fact that it hit you on the weak side of your skull doesn’t help. Mind if I take a look?” He pulled out a pocket light and told Walter to keep his eyes open and looked briefly in both eyes. “Yep, you’ve definitely had a concussion. How’d you get here?”

“I drove,” Walter said.

“Shouldn’t have done that.” He snaked a stethoscope under Walter’s shirt and put his finger to his lips, then when he was satisfied he gripped him with a blood pressure cuff and pumped it up and watched it deflate. He pulled back and assessed Walter with a neutral expression. “We’ll get a nurse in here to help you with the forms. Have you ever had a CT scan?”

“The last time I had a concussion. It was actually a double. Nine years ago.”

“I’m thinking we should do another. Just to be safe. Okay?” the doctor said.

“Okay,” Walter said.

“It will have to wait until morning. So we’ll be keeping you overnight.”

Walter’s heart jumped or dropped, he couldn’t tell which. He clutched his chest, then realized how ridiculous he must have looked, and with his free hand pulled the other hand from him. “Do no harm?” his father had always said about hospitals. “I don’t think so.”

“You don’t want to stay?” the doctor observed. “Come on. It will be relaxing. We’ll get you a bed upstairs in a non-private room and take your blood pressure every two hours and make you recite your name and today’s
date and where you are and generally just give you an awful night's rest. Doesn't that sound like a good plan?"

“No,” Walter said miserably.

“Well, it is,” the doctor said. He snatched up Walter's clipboard and Walter saw the magazine was attached to it again. He was sure he had put it elsewhere. “This magazine,” the doctor said. “I keep asking them to stop subscribing but nobody listens to doctors any more. You probably shouldn't be reading anyway.”

Walter looked down at his feet. He was wearing sandals and he suddenly realized how cold and numb he was beginning to feel. “It's freezing in here,” he said.

“That's the concussion,” the doctor said. “It can sensitize and desensitize you at the same time.” He snapped open the curtain. “The nurse will be in shortly to escort you upstairs.” He shut the curtain after him.

Walter saw with a start that although the clipboard had been taken from the bay, the magazine lay looking up at him from the bed.

He picked it up with two fingers. How many hands had touched it, how much sickness was it already channeling? Hospitals could kill you. Still, he ought to be all right with a concussion.

Then the curtain opened and Nurse—Nurse someone, he'd forgotten her name—pushed a wheelchair in ahead of her. “Care for a ride?” she said. He saw with some apprehension that she had the clipboard under her arm.

“I don't believe this,” Walter muttered as he maneuvered himself into the chair.

“Regulations,” she said. “And when we discharge you tomorrow, it will be the same drill all the way out to the sidewalk.”

He tried to smile at her reassuring words.

She dropped the magazine and the clipboard onto his lap. “Reading isn't great, but it might be easier on you than the television.”

“This magazine—” Walter said.

“It's whiney,” she agreed as she pushed him out through the ER. “And we all whine about it.”

They waited for an elevator in one of the hospital's nether corridors. Walter remembered how after the birth of his first son he and his daughter

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He picked it up with two fingers. How many hands had touched the magazine, how much sickness was it already channeling?
had gotten lost and locked out in one such hall, until someone opened a
door from outside and they'd been able to escape. But that was at another
hospital in another state a lot of years ago.

"Atlanta," Walter said.

"What?" the nurse said, scrutinizing him.

"I got lost in a hospital in Atlanta," he said.

"Well, don't worry, you won't get lost here. We're not that big."
The red light chimed and then the elevator doors opened and he was
rolled on. She pressed the button for the fourth floor. "The Penthouse,"
she said.

As they rose quickly through the hospital, he felt queasy, and when he
swallowed he tasted bile.

"You doing okay?" she said.

He nodded but for the moment was unable to speak.

He was rolled out onto a carpeted floor overlooked by a tall, brightly painted nurses' station, and he could have been anywhere.
He could have been in Atlanta or Boston or Sacramento or any of the other places they had lived before they had
moved here ten years ago. What a long time it was to remain in a place like
this, and how much longer could they last?

"I've got Walter here," the nurse called out, and a head rose from
behind the nurses' desk and a woman peered over and down at him, one of
those people of apparently great height and even greater authority.

"422," she said. "His family is already there, and Ron will get him all
set up."

"See," the ER nurse said cheerily, "you're not alone." She started him
down a long corridor. It was so long they seemed to be moving in slow
motion, and he had an opportunity to look at his lap, flip open the maga-
zine to a familiar page, and steal another glance.

Like the slow advancement up some professional ladder, by the time you attain that to
which you long aspired you have already set your eyes on some more distant rung, and you
cannot even appreciate the rung you now grasp in your cold and calculating hand.

Every day you play with the idea of opening the door onto a new empty life, and every
day you don't.

The writer was only addressing himself, and Walter had to stop feeling
so bombarded by the bright light and the white walls and the black print
throb on the glossy page. He shut his eyes and the pressure coming from within his skull seemed to amplify. He could visualize the swelling of the brain where it had been struck, but he felt as if the whole brain was swollen, even ballooning, until they'd have to—

"Don't drill," he said. He thought he'd said it fiercely but he could barely hear himself.

"Honey?"

He looked up and there was Callie—Claire—whatever she was called, and standing behind her were three kids looking to be shielded from anything infectious or abnormal, here only to do their duty. He had experienced their distance many times before, but to feel it from a wheelchair seemed to further disable him.

"Hey," he said. He mustered whatever cheer he had. "Hey, kids!"

"He looks a little different," Claire told the nurse, as if he himself wasn't present.

"He's upset," the nurse said. "He doesn't want to spend the night."

"This magazine." Walter waved the magazine weakly at his wife. "Callie—I mean, Claire—have you ever seen it?"

"I thought you said it was a glancing blow," she said.

"He'll have an MRI in the morning," the nurse said.

"Ooh, Dad, make sure you take off all your jewelry," the fifteen-year-old girl said. Her name was . . .

"Daddy doesn't wear jewelry," the four-year-old sputtered, and kicked her.

"Christopher," she said, and yanked at his hair. That was her main move whenever she wanted to settle him. Walter was sure he and Claire—Claire—had spoken to her about it. He looked beyond them and saw the middle child hanging back quietly, wearing glasses even though he was only supposed to wear them in school.

"Hey, David," he said.

David came right to him and hugged him within the wheelchair. He never hugged him. Walter looked up at Claire to see if she had put the boy up to it.

"You're wincing," she said.

"I had a dream about being tortured," he suddenly recalled. "The guy kept telling me, 'You don't know what torture is. You don't know what real pain feels like.' I couldn't eat or drink so it would hurt less. Then I dreamed I had a cyanide pill and I took it."
“When did you dream this?” the nurse asked sharply.
“I don’t know,” he said.
“He’s not supposed to have slept yet,” the nurse told Claire.
“He hasn’t,” Claire insisted. “Unless he slept on his way over here. And he was driving.”
“My goodness,” the nurse said.
“I might have nodded off briefly at a stop sign,” Walter confessed. “I had my foot on the brake the whole time. I might have even yanked the hand brake. I haven’t had an accident, really, in twenty-eight years.” Instinctively he felt the back of his head. There was a bag of ice there, held in place by who-knew-what. “When did they do this?” he said to no one in particular.
“It’s nothing to worry about,” the nurse said. She gently pushed the wheelchair into the room and helped him onto the side of the bed. A hand steadied his shoulder but it wasn’t hers.
“Walter, I’m Ron. I’ll be your nurse tonight.”
“Can I sleep now?” Walter said. He was too tired to look at him. He was too tired to look at anything.
“We’d really like to keep you awake as long as possible,” Ron said.
“I don’t want to look at anything,” Walter said.
Ron adjusted the bed. “You can lie back now, Mr. Randers.” Walter allowed himself to be shifted fully onto the bed. Ron had a beaming face and hair that was red enough you could see it was red even in the dim light from the headboard, which was below and behind the head of the bed. Claire was squinting at the damn magazine. “What amazes you most is how the obsession diminishes once it is fully fulfilled.” She laughed sadly; he had wondered about her but after a while you stopped wondering and became like everyone else, whatever that meant. “I don’t know that I want to know what that’s about,” she said.
“Don’t throw it away,” he said. “It might keep me awake.”
“Clarity,” she read on. “Every day is likely to bring more clarity and mystery.”
“See,” he said. The other nurse was long gone. From the hallway he could hear the children quietly tormenting each other. For a weird instant he thought they might all be in Europe, at some European hospital or a Holiday Inn. He glanced surreptitiously at Claire. They’d long since passed the time when they could look into each other’s eyes and know what they both were thinking, or perhaps he’d only kidded himself that such a time had existed.
“We didn’t go this year,” he said. “To Europe.”
Claire looked up from the magazine. “No, that’s true. We didn’t.”
“T was the only one who wanted to go. We stayed in a Holiday Inn in Amsterdam once. The kids were so horrible that we all hated each other, and after we put them to bed we had to get stoned on the tiny balcony.”
“Walter!”
Shrill sounds from the hall seemed to shred the room.
“Excuse me,” Claire said.
Walter was left alone with Ron, who leaned back against the curtained window.
“Sometimes, all this mid-life exercise, I think I might be getting an enlarged heart,” Walter volunteered.
“How hard you working out?” Ron said.
“I do five miles in forty minutes. I even do intervals. I’ve had so many concussions in my life that when I warm up and do three sets of ten this or ten that I lose track and end up doing four or five or two sets. I have to remind myself of everything all the time.”
Ron moved from the window and straightened the pillow behind Walter’s head.
“You’re going to be all right,” he said.
“I’m not upset,” Walter said.
“Anything else you think we should know?”
“I never finished my history.” Walter searched around him for the clipboard. His hand landed on the magazine. He looked at his wrist and saw he was wearing a plastic hospital bracelet. A lot of things had been going on that he’d been missing. He glanced over at Ron and he had the clipboard and was writing against it and calling out questions and Walter could hear himself offering responses as if his voice belonged to someone else. He kept trying to visualize the list but all he saw were lines crisscrossing between two separate columns of texts, like in one of those quizzes that they made you take in high school. He’d hated high school. His daughter loved it. He’d found out recently that she was already having some kind of sex, and this—this upset him, if you wanted to talk about him being upset. Then last week he discovered that his son was visiting pornographic web sites. The barn door was open and the animals were advancing into the night. How about yours?
“We’re done!” Ron said.

He’d found out recently that she was already having some kind of sex, and this—this upset him.
“We are?” Walter was startled.

“Your history.” He began moving quickly from the room. “Let me stick it in your chart and I’ll be right back.”

For the first time since the car ride over he felt truly alone. He felt the magazine under his hand and lifted it to his eyes. At least his glasses had been repaired. At least Claire had done that for him. He flipped to a page and squinted.

Some months you could sleep through and you wouldn’t miss anything. Perhaps for you that would be eleven out of twelve.

A dime on the floor. There is hope in a dime on the floor. But this solipsistic dark is just treading water.

Walter let the magazine drop to the bed, where it began to slide toward the floor. He snatched at it and kept it on the bed. It used to be that he had not wanted it on his bed, but something had changed.

He looked to his right and saw a curtain sealed him off from what must be the other bed in the room, the bed closer to the toilet and to the hall. Was anyone there? It would probably be rude to ask. God, he never should have admitted getting stoned to that nurse. That was private and he’d made it public. He had enough he had to keep from other people that sometimes it seemed that he ended up keeping stuff from himself, and when he came upon whatever else might be true he felt actual surprise, as if that couldn’t possibly be him becoming the kind of person he had vowed he would not become.

“I have to go,” he said to no one in particular. When he moved his arm to swing himself from the bed it hit something plastic and attached to a cord, and the television suddenly clicked on. To his horror a picture instantly appeared of the local talk show where the host hid behind a sheet of her own combed-down blond hair and posed questions you could barely hear while some Chamber of Commerce type answered as if nothing was amiss. Walter had been on once, and at one point could not restrain himself from reaching out in an unsuccessful attempt to part her façade, and she’d cut the show short, but afterward... afterward she told him very privately that he was the only guest to ever try something like that, and her hair, when she leaned in, seemed to privately engulf him. And later still she had wrenched the ring on her own finger and sobbed, “What about
this? Doesn’t this mean anything?” and in his numbness and his glow all he could respond was “I don’t know.” He tried to click the television off but he couldn’t find the right button.

“You called?” Ron said, striding into his portion of the room.

“I can’t turn the TV off,” Walter said. “I don’t know how it got on in the first place.”

Ron snapped it off, manually. Walter supposed the word was, since he didn’t bother with the remote.

“I’m just finishing up and then I’ll be right back,” Ron said, already leaving. “Your wife took the kids to the grill.”

The hospital had a grill? But Ron had already gone. If Walter got up and walked to the window and if the window looked out on the parking lot, would he see the children dragging Claire along or would she be dragging them or would they be rushing en masse away from him? He untangled himself from the remote cord and stood from the bed. He felt a little dizzy or shaky or both, as if his own brain was literally trying to speak to him. Don’t go to the window, he heard. Don’t go to the window. He stared politely ahead as he moved across the foot of the other bed, even though he sensed it was empty. He opened the bathroom door and shut it behind him and a light popped on just like on an airplane. He sat on the pot. That was his father’s phrase and he tried to eject it from his head, but there was so much wrapped up in there that he’d been trying to get out that it was all tightly balled up, like a knot he’d been working to undo but had only made more knotted. He was still on the pot. The magazine had come in with him.

_It’s amazing if you sit here long enough how much comes out. It goes and then stops and even though you feel there is more in there you do feel you could get up and go on but if you stay eventually it will start again. It is lucky to have the leisure to be like this._

_The only reward is what is in the bowl._

The bastard. Now Walter knew exactly what he was talking about. He stuffed the magazine in the waste can and cleaned himself up and took a look before he was going to flush and—blood. Bright red. A lot of blood. He thought he might faint. But he remembered he’d been running; it was just dehydration. He flushed and washed his hands and splashed water on his face. He opened the door to find I-b-h-r-h-m-a leaning against the opposite wall.

“IBHRHMA,” he said. “God damn you.”

“You don’t look so hot,” IBHRHMA—no, it was someone else—said, unfolding his arms and stepping forward.
“Ron?” Walter said. “I. Blood. In the bowl.”

“You passed some blood,” Ron translated for him.

“A lot,” Walter said. “Dehydrated from my run, I guess.”

“Let’s get you back to bed.” Ron took him by the wrist and curved an arm around him, as if he might fall or make a run for it, but Walter had already had his run to nowhere. Imagine if every time you got on that treadmill you were actually only knocking yourself in the head rather than working something out. Never admit anything, was the only advice men like himself had ever offered him. Because then all that was left was to write the check.

Now he was lying on the bed and people in white coats and green scrubs were swirling around him. A doctor he did not know was explaining about an IV and sugar water and how it was no big deal but better safe than sorry.

“I couldn’t just drink it?” Walter thought he protested but he could hear only their voices, and in his veins he felt a strange surge, but also as if he was being drained, too. “Am I going to be all right?” he asked worriedly. “Not that I deserve to be.”

“You’re going to be just fine,” a woman offered, pinning one of Walter’s arms to the bed. Didn’t these fools know he wasn’t going to struggle, or was he struggling and didn’t even know it himself? His eyes shut, and soon he was swimming in a dark sea, which he recognized as anesthesia. Then he was reading that magazine and it told him that the truth was, while he’d known enough people in his lifetime, he had struggled to engage any of them on the kind of equal terms that would always remain a mystery to someone like him. The truth was he had an angry, selfish heart. The truth was he would never know the truth, because while he could see it, he couldn’t face it. The truth was—what was the truth?

By the time he imagined he woke up, they’d already begun drilling.

“I want to admit everything.” he tried to tell them. “I do, I do.”