

## I.

ALAN CLAY WOKE up in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. It was May 30, 2010. He had spent two days on planes to get there.

In Nairobi he had met a woman. They sat next to each other while they waited for their flights. She was tall, curvy, with tiny gold earrings. She had ruddy skin and a lilting voice. Alan liked her more than many of the people in his life, people he saw every day. She said she lived in upstate New York. Not that far away from his home in suburban Boston.

If he had courage he would have found a way to spend more time with her. But instead he got on his flight and he flew to Riyadh and then to Jeddah. A man picked him up at the airport and drove him to the Hilton.

With a click, Alan entered his room at the Hilton at 1:12 a.m. He quickly prepared to go to bed. He needed to sleep. He had to travel an hour north at seven for an eight o'clock arrival at the King Abdullah

Economic City. There he and his team would set up a holographic tele-conference system and would wait to present it to King Abdullah himself. If Abdullah was impressed, he would award the IT contract for the entire city to Reliant, and Alan's commission, in the mid-six figures, would fix everything that ailed him.

So he needed to feel rested. To feel prepared. But instead he had spent four hours in bed not sleeping.

He thought of his daughter Kit, who was in college, a very good and expensive college. He did not have the money to pay her tuition for the fall. He could not pay her tuition because he had made a series of foolish decisions in his life. He had not planned well. He had not had courage when he needed it.

His decisions had been short sighted.

The decisions of his peers had been short sighted.

These decisions had been foolish and expedient.

But he hadn't known at the time that his decisions were short sighted, foolish or expedient. He and his peers did not know they were making decisions that would leave them, leave Alan, as he now was — virtually broke, nearly unemployed, the proprietor of a one-man consulting firm run out of his home office.

He was divorced from Kit's mother Ruby. They had now been apart longer than they had been together. Ruby was an unholy pain in the ass who now lived in California and contributed nothing financially to Kit's

finances. College is *your* thing, she told him. Be a man about it, she said.

Now Kit would not be in college in the fall. Alan had put his house on the market but it had not yet sold. Otherwise he was out of options. He owed money to many people, including \$18k to a pair of bicycle designers who had built him a prototype for a new bicycle he thought he could manufacture in the Boston area. For this he was called an idiot. He owed money to Jim Wong, who had loaned him \$45k to pay for materials and the first and last on a warehouse lease. He owed another \$65k or so to a half-dozen friends and would-be partners.

So he was broke. And when he realized he could not pay Kit's tuition, it was too late to apply for any other aid. Too late to transfer.

Was it a tragedy that a healthy young woman like Kit would take a semester off of college? No, it was not a tragedy. The long, tortured history of the world would take no notice of a missed semester of college for a smart and capable young woman like Kit. She would survive. It was no tragedy. Nothing like tragedy.

They said it was a tragedy what had happened to Charlie Fallon. Charlie Fallon froze to death in the lake near Alan's house. The lake next to Alan's house.

Alan was thinking of Charlie Fallon while not sleeping in the room at the Jeddah Hilton. Alan had seen Charlie step into the lake that day. Alan was driving away, on his way to the quarry. It had not seemed normal that a man like Charlie Fallon would be stepping into the shimmering black lake in September, but neither was it extraordinary.

Charlie Fallon had been sending Alan pages from books. He had been doing this for two years. Charlie had discovered the Transcenden-

talists late in life and felt a kinship with them. He had seen that Brook Farm was not far from where he and Alan lived, and he thought it meant something. He traced his Boston ancestry, hoping to find a connection, but found none. Still, he sent Alan pages, with passages highlighted.

The workings of a privileged mind, Alan thought. Don't send me more of that shit, he told Charlie. But Charlie grinned and sent more.

So when Alan saw Charlie stepping into the lake at noon on a Saturday he saw it as a logical extension of the man's new passion for the land. He was only ankle-deep when Alan passed him that day.