



## Hold me now

By Stephen Gauer

Paul Brenner usually had dinner with his son Daniel the second Friday of every month but on that particular Friday in May, the Friday that would be the last day of his son's life, he cancelled because Gwen had invited him over and that was unusual because she worked most evenings. Daniel, who was 27 and rather easy-going, said he didn't mind; he told his father he'd probably meet up with friends for sushi and maybe take in a movie and he mentioned one that Brenner wanted to see and for a moment Brenner considered changing his mind, but he didn't.

Instead, Brenner locked his office and walked over to Robson Street and headed down towards the park. At the corner of Cardero he stopped to buy eggs, garlic and lettuce at a gourmet food store. When he got to Gwen's building, a tall tower of green and blue glass overlooking

the harbour, he punched the entry code, waited for her to press the buzzer and then walked into the lobby. The security guard gave him a suspicious look but said nothing as he walked to the bank of elevators.

Gwen opened her door and said, "I'm beat, I just got in, there's wine on the counter." She was wearing the gray pantsuit she often wore to Friday night showings. She was a former movie production designer who'd taken up real estate when her marriage ended and now made a very good living at it. The pantsuits were expensive. Brenner gave her a kiss, closed his eyes, and filled his head with the smell of her perfume. L'Air Du Temps. Or was it Chanel? He could never tell the difference. What did that matter? She smelled wonderful.

When he put his arms around her, she said, "Please, not yet," and turned away and went into the bedroom. He went into the kitchen and put the bag on the counter, removed the food, and began to organize the meal he would cook for them. Then he opened the bottle of Beaujolais by the fridge and poured two large glasses.

When Gwen came out again, she was wearing a dark red kimono with bursts of white flowers on the front. He could see a teasing hint of lacy underwear between the folds of the kimono.

They sat on stools at the black marble counter in the kitchen as they ate the omelette and salad he'd made. It wasn't until after the divorce, until after he'd learned how to read a recipe, buy good food and prepare proper meals, that he'd realized how deeply satisfying it was to cook for someone else. Why hadn't his mother or Louise, his ex-wife, ever talked about this? Gwen appreciated his simple meals. She rarely cooked for herself and ate out most of the time. Now she concentrated carefully on each piece of omelette as she cut it with a knife and fork and raised it to her mouth.

She asked him about his day. He did legal work for wealthy clients who owned hotels in the city. But he didn't want to talk about work. "Are you tired?" he asked. What he should have said was *I hope you're not too tired to make love because I would love to ravish you.*

"Not too tired," she said. She took another sip of wine. "No, not too tired." She smiled at him.

He rinsed the plates under the sink and put them in the dishwasher. As the door of the dishwasher came up, he straightened and then felt her arms come around his chest and begin to undo the buttons on his shirt. He pulled her fingers to his mouth and kissed them. He turned around and she led him by the hand to the bedroom. She pulled the drapes to darken the room against the enduring light of the May evening and then untied her kimono and let it drop to the floor.

He fingered the lacy edge of the bra he had bought her. He reached around and undid the bra, and then stripped it away from her breasts so that he could kiss them and begin the arousal that like clockwork would soon take them deep into the motions of sex between the sheets of her bed, with the comforter pushed to the floor, with Gwen on top and her voice loud and defiant, filling the room with her cries. As he moved his tongue he thought for a few seconds about how familiar this was, and how many times he had done it before, thousands, perhaps, and how every time was new and yet also old and sadly familiar. How could that be? Why did he still want it so much?

The next day was fair and warm. Brenner spent most of it at the marina working on his boat. By seven o'clock, all the jobs on his worklist were checked off. He sat in the cockpit, enjoying a chicken sandwich and bottle of wine. Across the water in the neighbouring slip a young man

was helping his girlfriend climb over the lifelines and into the cockpit of a small sailboat called *Dumb Luck*. The young man held her hand and made jokes about falling into the water. She said something that Brenner couldn't quite hear. Seagulls were yelling somewhere in the distance. Brenner looked away and then up at the sky, still a perfect, sheltering blue. The light it cast on the earth made the entire marina glow.

Brenner's cellphone rang. He put the sandwich down. He stumbled down the stairs into the cabin and picked up the phone. "Hello," he said.

"Paul, it's George." George was Louise's new husband.

"Yes," Brenner said. "Yes, George?"

There was a long silence. "George?"

"Paul, please bear with me."

Brenner was impatient now. He heard sounds in the background.

"What's wrong, where are you?"

"Paul, I am at the hospital. Vancouver General."

"Louise, is it Louise?"

"Paul, please, I am trying to tell you. The police have found Daniel. They have found his ... his body."

"No," Brenner said. He was speaking loudly now. "Let me speak to Louise. George, let me speak to Louise." His hand was shaking.

"Louise cannot talk to you now," George said.

"Alright then, I'm coming," Brenner said. He stood up too quickly and hit his head on the cabintop. "George, tell Louise I'm coming." He carefully snapped the cellphone shut and put it in his pocket. He began to speak out loud, as though issuing commands to himself. *Step up into the cockpit. Leave the bottle on the table. Step over the lifeline and onto the slip. Move slowly. Do not trip or fall.*

He began to run down the dock towards the marina gate. When two men blocked his way, he shouted at them and pushed them aside. One almost fell into the water and yelled back at him, "Buddy, what the fuck?" Then he was through the heavy gate and into the parking lot, running again, the parking lot full on a Saturday night, and far too many cars and he had to think to remember where he had parked, and then he double clicked the remote so the flashers would flash and he could see his car, there it was, and quickly he was standing beside his car, he opened the door and got in and started the engine and the music of Bach flooded the car, he punched a button to turn that off, and then drove out of the parking lot, quickly turned left, and drove a quarter of a mile twisting along the shore; then he turned right, up the steep winding road to the main highway and merged into the traffic, heavy from a ferry arrival and he shifted through five gears quick, quicker, quickest, quickest to the speed limit and beyond and his only thoughts were for his son. Daniel, oh, Daniel.

He could see George waiting for him in the front lobby of the hospital. Where was Louise? As he waited for the automatic doors to open, he saw two police officers talking to each other. George was staring at him now. Brenner entered the hospital, and looked around at the bright emptiness of it, the harsh concrete walls and highlights of wood trim, the coffee bar off to the left, the colourful art, and thought *This looks like a hotel, not a hospital, when did this all change?*

George touched him on the shoulder and said his name. He introduced the two police officers. The older officer asked Brenner to confirm that he was Daniel's father and Brenner said "Yes, of course I am. Would you please tell me what's happened?"

"Sir, please follow me," the officer said.

George and Brenner followed the officers down a hallway, around a corner and down another hallway and around yet another corner and then through a door to a small lounge where Louise was waiting.

When Louise looked up at him, Brenner met her eyes and saw an expression of such grief and despair that he had to look away, at the walls, at the ceiling, at the tidy pile of magazines on the table in front of her, before he could look at her again. "Paul," she said, "please sit beside me."

Brenner sat down. His ex-wife reached for his hand, and then, not satisfied by the meagre contact of his fingers, turned and put her arms around him and placed her hot face against his and began to cry again.

"Mr. Brenner," the officer was saying, "we have reason to believe that your son was attacked in the park last night, shortly before midnight—"

"What park?" Brenner said. "What are you talking about? What are you talking about?"

"Sir, please, I understand this is very difficult. The body of a young male matching your son's description was found near Second Beach in Stanley Park."

"You're wrong," Brenner said. He thought the situation was absurd, farcical. Surely it was just a matter of calling Daniel to confirm that he was alright, that he was safe, that this was a horrible, grotesque mistake. Brenner took his cellphone out of his pocket and flipped open the top, and began to punch buttons.

George suddenly reached over and stopped him. "Paul. Daniel has been missing all day. That's why we're here."

“No, I think we’re here because someone has made a very serious error.” Brenner could feel the anger move down through his body in one long electrified wave. His head was clear now. The wine had stolen his energy but he could still think clearly even though he was tired. “So you haven’t identified this young man?”

The officer shook his head. “He was naked. Except for a pair of athletic shoes on his feet. Nikes, I believe.”

“Well that proves it, doesn’t it? Daniel would not be naked in Stanley Park on a Friday night at midnight. My son ... my son would not do that.”

Louise had released him. She sat very still. Her hands were folded in her lap. She looked down at her hands and then said, “Please, Paul, you must get up and go with this man. Right now. Please.”

The younger officer stayed behind with Louise. Brenner, George and the older police officer walked out of the lounge and took an elevator down to the basement of the hospital. The three men walked down a corridor without talking, following purple signs to the morgue. They finally stopped outside a blue door. The officer knocked and the door opened. A young woman dressed in blue nodded and said something Brenner couldn’t hear. They walked into the large, brightly lit room. The officer said something to the young woman. Brenner stared at the chrome wall of rectangular doors behind which lay the corpses. His anger had drained away. Panic had infiltrated and destroyed the clarity of his mind. He was exerting such a strenuous effort to keep calm that his body felt like a single muscle contracted to the point of tearing; each motion towards the wall, towards the body now waiting for him inside a bag, required the strength of three men, not one.

The sound of the zipper broke the silence.

The mask that was Daniel's face had a waxy, brownish colour. The eyes were closed. The skin looked ancient and dead. A large purple oval on the neck leered obscenely at Brenner. Smaller bruises on the side of the head looked like islands of such terrible pain that Brenner wanted to reach down and comfort his son. He moved his hand toward Daniel's forehead and then stopped and pulled it away.

He stepped back from the body of his son. The young woman pushed the heavy drawer back into the wall, which became once again a perfect surface of polished chrome. Brenner stared at the wall and looked away, and then stared at it again, as though some kind of message or sign might appear across it. In the bright lights of the room he saw only the meaningless reflection of the painted floor.

George's arm was around him suddenly for support, and just in time, for the contraction of his body had suddenly eased, replaced by the feeling that his skeleton was dissolving, forcing his body down onto the floor into a shapeless mass of muscle and nerve and brain and blood and sputtering heart.

Later, the three of them sat on hard metallic chairs in the kitchen of George's house. George poured three glasses of wine.

"I'm sorry," George said. "I'm very sorry."

Louise said nothing. Brenner stared at her face, now so swollen from crying that he barely recognized her. "The police will have questions," he said.

"Yes," George said. "I gave them your number."

There was a long silence, then Brenner said, "I will deal with the funeral home."

"If you want, I know some very good people—"

"I said I will deal with it."

"Yes," George said. "Of course you will."

Another silence stretched out between them. Brenner emptied his glass. George poured him a second. Louise looked at her husband. George said, "He can spend the night here if he wants."

"No thank you," Brenner said. The thought of sleeping in George's house for even one night repelled him.

Louise put her glass down and began to cry again. George got up from his chair and went to her and she stood up and he held her in his arms and spoke very softly to her. Brenner stood up and began to back away from them. As he moved away, a sense of aloneness came over him so powerfully, so overwhelmingly, that he put his hand over his mouth for fear that he would cry out right there in George's kitchen.

He found his way to the front door and left.

Brenner drove very slowly over the bridge and when he reached the middle, looked left out over the water of the inlet as though expecting to see something there in the blackness. He slowed the car so much that someone behind him honked. He sped up again and hurried home.

The bed embraced him like a womb. He slept only moments at a time. By dawn, he was wet with sweat and stiff with exhaustion. He felt no hunger, no thirst. He tried to assemble in his mind a list of the things that needed to be done in the wake of Daniel's death but the list would not hold steady because a single thought kept returning and interrupting.

*Who did this and why?*

The two homicide detectives refused his offer of coffee and drank bottled mineral water instead. They sat side by side, facing him across the glass coffee table. The detective on the right was named Leung but he spoke

English with no accent at all, so Brenner assumed he'd been born in Canada. Leung sat very still and took notes while the other detective, Karlya, asked Brenner questions about his background, Daniel's background, and the events of Friday evening. In law school Brenner had never had the slightest interest in criminal law or courtroom procedure or police methodology. As a rule, he avoided contact with the police as much as possible. But he appreciated their courtesy and good manners, their polite attention, their obvious professionalism. But he couldn't help but wonder, *Are these men smart enough to catch my son's murderer?*

He answered the questions calmly and slowly, omitting only certain personal references, such as the fact that he and Gwen had made love sometime around eight thirty on Friday evening. He described Gwen as a "friend". When Karlya asked if this was an ongoing relationship, he thought the question irrelevant to the investigation but answered *Yes* anyways. Could he shed any light on his son's activities in Stanley Park at midnight on Friday? Brenner said no, he knew only that his son had planned to meet friends for sushi and then see a movie. When Karlya asked him if he was aware his son was a homosexual, he said yes, of course, Daniel had come out to his family four years earlier, when he was at university. There was a long silence after this question. Karlya's cell phone rang. He answered it, spoke very briefly, and closed it again.

Brenner asked him to explain what happened to his son. Karlya said Daniel was found unconscious in one of the parking lots at approximately 12:15 am by a West End resident named Connally who often walked the seawall at night. Connally heard a man's voice cry out, and then saw some kind of SUV, perhaps a Pathfinder or Explorer, exit

the parking lot very quickly. Connally found Daniel face down on the pavement, barely breathing. He called 911 and stayed with Daniel until the ambulance arrived. Daniel was declared dead on arrival at the emergency ward of Vancouver General.

“It must have been a gang,” Brenner said.

“We don’t know that yet,” Karlya said. “It seems extremely likely, based on Mr. Connally’s statements, that more than one individual was involved.”

“There are no other witnesses.”

“We are pursuing that.”

“But whoever did this ... was driving a Pathfinder.”

“Possibly. Mr. Brenner, at this point in the investigation, as you can well understand, we are still organizing and collating the very preliminary information we have.”

“Of course,” Brenner said. “Do you know the colour of the Pathfinder?”

“We’re not certain it was a Pathfinder. It may have been a Pathfinder. It may have been an Explorer.”

“How often may I call you?” Brenner asked. The Chinese detective, Leung, was putting his notebook away. Brenner assumed they were getting ready to leave.

“Whenever you want, Mr. Brenner, but mornings are best. Before noon.” He handed Brenner a card with several phone numbers on it.

“You can expect the media to come calling tomorrow morning around 9:20, after our daily briefing. Do you have a listed number?”

“Yes,” Brenner said. He had not thought about this aspect of Daniel’s death. “But can’t you withhold the name? I mean, the family name?”

“No sir,” Karlya said. “However we do offer a full range of counselling and consultative services.” He gave Brenner another card. “I assume you have a lawyer.”

Brenner looked at him. “I am a lawyer.”

“I know you are,” Karlya said. “But you’d be well advised to have someone with recent criminal experience on your side.”

“What do you mean, ‘on my side’?”

“Sir, this is going to be a long and difficult process for you and your family. You should take advantage of every resource that’s available.”

“Every resource?”

“Yes. Every resource.”

What was the cop suggesting? That it was Daniel’s fault he was murdered? What was he doing naked in the park at midnight? Fucking men, obviously. Or getting fucked by them. That’s what gay men did. In the dark. In the bushes. Brenner felt as though someone had poured ice water down the centre of his spine. He shivered once, and then shivered again. For a moment he was afraid he would not be able to stop shivering.

“Mr. Brenner?” They were at the door of the condo now. Both men were wearing suits, white shirts, dark ties. What day was it?

“What?”

“Are you ... are you alright?”

The Chinese detective put his arm on Brenner’s shoulder for a moment, as though to prevent him from falling over. Brenner took a step backwards and said he was fine. He needed to lie down. He needed to have something to eat and then to lie down.

“Thank you for your time,” Karlya said.

On the Wednesday after Daniel's death, Brenner got on the 250 bus and went to work. He sat on the right side, near the back, as he always did, and tried to read his newspaper as the bus gathered speed along Marine Drive and turned south towards the bridge. Here, as the traffic merged slowly from four lanes into two, Brenner put the paper down because he could not read it. That was a habit from the old world, and now he was in a new world.

The people on the bus were the same people as the week before, weren't they? Brenner recognized some of them: a man without expression who wore expensive gray suits and polished black shoes, a bony, pale-faced woman whose attention was always devoted to a paperback romance novel, a young man with very long straight hair who moved his head in a regular rhythm as he listened to some kind of high-speed rock and roll on headphones, a young woman with dark circles under her eyes who liked purple clothes and heavy black boots and chunky silver bracelets. But now they were different than before because he saw them as parents or children, the only roles that mattered.

In the elevator of his building, Brenner looked around and saw smiling faces. People were chatting happily about weekend barbeques, golf games, trips to Whistler, work in the garden, baseball games with the kids, the end of hockey, the start of the baseball. No one looked at him. His picture had not appeared in the paper.

He walked through the door into the reception area and said good morning to Grace, the receptionist. For once, she did not smile when she said good morning. He went into his office and shut the door. He sat down, looked out the window at the harbour, at Stanley Park, at the mountains to the north, at the waters of the inlet, smooth and gray in

the soft morning light. Everything seemed closer, as though pushing from behind to crowd the city into a smaller space.

He felt as though he had been away for a very long time. The desk seemed larger and more solid, the chair more comfortable, than he remembered. There were piles of paper on the top of the desk. He examined a couple of documents, recognizing the names of clients he had not thought about since last Friday.

He checked his email. His mother had sent him quotations about death and courage and love and forgiveness. He read them quickly and replied to each one with a short comment and thank you. Clients had left short voice-mail messages saying they were very sorry to hear the news about Daniel and would try to reach Brenner later in the week. There were messages from reporters who wanted to interview or photograph him. He erased all the messages. When he was finished, he sat without thinking, looking out the window at the two huge heaps of yellow sulfur on the far shore of the inlet. Everything in the landscape blended together, the browns, greens and blues that defined the coast, always soft and a little out of focus, but this beautiful yellow was separate and pure. He stared for a moment. There was a knock at the door.

Grace came in and put a bouquet of flowers on his desk. "This is from my family," she said. "We did not know Daniel, but we offer our sympathies to you."

"Thank you, Grace, and thank your family, please," Brenner said. He realized he knew nothing about Grace's family. Was there a mother and father, brothers and sisters? He knew there was a boyfriend studying computer science at university, but that was all. He knew nothing about her, really, nothing at all.

"How is your family, Grace?" he said.

“Very well, Mr. Brenner. But my mother has been crying for you. She lost her younger brother, last year, in a very bad car crash.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It was in Shanghai. He went back to visit family.”

“I see.” There was silence. Was she waiting to say something?

“Mr. Brenner—.”

“Please call me Paul,” he said.

“Yes, I know ... Paul ... will they catch the men?”

“I hope so,” he said, knowing he could have said *with every fibre of my being I believe the men who did this should be caught and punished.*

“I hope so too,” she said. “They should be destroyed.”

Once, riding the bus home, Brenner had stared over the shoulder of a young Chinese woman studying the results of her English test. One question had asked, “What punishment do you think is appropriate for people who create computer viruses?” and the young woman had answered, “I think cut off their hands is the best punishment because hand is very important for them.” Brenner realized it was a terrible stereotype to think the Chinese ruthless. But were you assumed innocent until proven guilty in China? Or did criminals have to prove their innocence? That would shake things up, wouldn’t it?

Brenner moved paper around and pretended to work. There were no demands on him, at least not yet, but soon work would begin pulling at him, subdividing his time and attention, breaking every hour into the fifteen-minute increments that he billed, and while the effort required to deal with that at the moment seemed overwhelming, he knew that within days he would again do useful things for clients, send out bills and receive cheques in return.

The other lawyers came in to express their condolences. They offered to cover his files and deal with clients while he was off work. He thanked them. He was moved by their kindness and support. No one said the killers should be destroyed. Those had been Grace's words. No one said these things because they weren't correct things to say in this country, Canada, a good country that thought quite highly of itself. Grace said them because she wasn't fully Canadian yet. But Grace was an intelligent young woman, soon to launch a business career once her night-school courses were done. *They should be destroyed*, she had said to Brenner, meaning every word.

His mother was waiting in her wheelchair at the front door of the retirement home. She wore a heavy coat, much too heavy for the time of year, and a hat he had never seen before, with feathers and some kind of gauzy material holding it together. He said good morning, leaned over and kissed her on the left cheek. She was wearing perfume, a little too much perhaps, and that was unusual too. "I never thought I would see this day," she said, "To outlive my own grandchild. My own grandchild!"

Brenner wheeled her carefully to the car, lifted her out of the chair and into the back seat, placing her carefully into position so she could fasten the seatbelt. He put the wheelchair into the trunk, slammed it shut, and got back into the car.

He said *Mother, I'd like you to meet Gwen*. She asked Gwen what her last name was, and Gwen said *Michaelson* and Brenner knew his mother was thinking, *English or Jewish?*

Brenner said little as he drove. He was thinking about what he would say about Daniel at the service. He had made notes on two pieces of paper and now those pieces of paper were folded and sitting in the

breast pocket of his suit jacket. Gwen and Jean talked about the weather and real estate and then Jean asked her how well she had known Daniel and Gwen, answering honestly, had said not at all, having only met him briefly the two times she and Brenner had run into him on Denman Street on the way to a movie or dinner. Jean seemed surprised by this. "So you haven't known my son for very long," she said.

"No," Gwen said. "Did you think I had?"

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I did."

They drove in silence the rest of the way. At the funeral home, Brenner parked the car as close to the main door as he could. He got out of the car and opened the door for Gwen. Then he got his mother's wheelchair out of the trunk, opened the back seat door and lifted his mother out and onto her feet briefly and then helped her down into the chair. She was wearing black stockings and sturdy shoes with buckles. He leaned down again and kissed her on the cheek. "And death," she said, "shall have no dominion."

Brenner looked at her.

"Dylan Thomas," she said.

"I know, mother," he said.

They went into the building, past the reception board that announced the service for Daniel Brenner in Chapel B, down the deserted beige hall, past the shelves with flowers, past a gilded mirror and into the chapel room, now filled with many rows of chairs. At the front, behind the lectern, a large table held a dozen photographs of Daniel, carefully arranged by Louise, and two enormous arrangements of carnations.

Brenner stepped up to the lectern for a moment and turned the microphone on and tested it by saying *Hello, good morning everyone thank you for coming* and then turned it off again.

Louise and George arrived a few minutes later. He introduced Gwen, and George made a comment about the real estate market and Brenner wondered if he would start to go on about that, but he didn't. Louise and Gwen exchanged careful glances as they negotiated the conversation. Brenner realized he'd never been in a room with two women he'd slept with before. An ex-wife, a girlfriend. Surely girlfriend was the wrong word? He was much too old. What was she, then? They had barely spoken all week. She had insisted on coming. He couldn't say no, but he felt no enthusiasm at the thought of her beside him.

Louise called to him. People were beginning to arrive. He walked over and stood beside her, near the door, in order to greet relatives and friends. Brenner noticed how each person he greeted had a different effect on him; his heart swelled with grief and his eyes filled with tears when the relatives he felt closest to held his hand and expressed their shock and sadness at Daniel's death. There were aunts and uncles, cousins, a few nieces and nephews. All the men were in suits, and the teenage boys looked so serious and mature in their jackets and ties. His colleagues from work showed up. Grace brought her mother, who took Brenner's left hand and held it in both of her hands and then quoted verses from the Bible.

Daniel's gay friends talked amongst themselves and Brenner realized that Louise knew some of them and he didn't. Did the gay people seem brighter and more expressive? Perhaps. You made people into stereotypes only because some of those stereotypes were true. To say that gay people had certain common qualities didn't mean you were

prejudiced. But how could you hold an intelligent opinion about something you knew so little about? You needed to educate yourself first. But how would you do that?

Gwen touched him on the elbow, reminding him that it was almost time to start. He said, *Yes it is, isn't it* and he felt a jangle of nervousness at the prospect of addressing so many people. He took the notes from the pocket of his jacket. He asked his family to take their seats in the front row. He went to the lectern, turned on the microphone and said calmly, *Hello, good morning everyone thank you for coming.*

The noise level dropped as everyone found a seat and sat down. Then there was complete silence, and as Brenner looked out over his audience, looked into the faces of people he knew and people he didn't, he felt the tremendous power of that silence. They were waiting for him to speak.

At first he stumbled over his words. He stopped for a moment, looked down at Louise, and then continued, more smoothly. He described his son as fully and as honestly as he could but he left many things out. He did not talk about the suicide attempt at sixteen and the visits to a psychiatrist and the many nights that he and Louise had spent in anguished conversation about how to help their son navigate the long black tunnel of his adolescence. He did not recreate the conversation in which Daniel, at the age of twenty three, had called his father to drive him home after a party at a friend's house when he'd had too much to drink and was afraid to get into his car, and Brenner so pleased that his son was mature enough to phone for the ride, and then at a red light Daniel turned to his father and told him he was gay and Brenner so taken by surprise he said nothing but, *Yes, son, I understand*, even though he didn't understand a thing. His heart sank at the thought that his son's life

could only become more difficult now, not less. To be gay meant a more difficult life, didn't it? Brenner thought so.

When he sat down again, Brenner was too exhausted to think. Beside him, Louise wept quietly.

The priest stood up and said nothing comprehensible and used the word soul so many times that Brenner lost count.

Two friends of Daniel's got up and told stories about his kindness and generosity, how he had once lent money to a friend to buy some decent clothes for a job interview and then took a morning off work to help the friend do the shopping, get a haircut and pull off a successful interview.

Then a young man with a guitar who'd been sitting in the last row got up, came to the front of the room and sang two of Daniel's songs. Brenner remembered some of the words because he'd heard Daniel sing these songs after he bought the new guitar. Daniel in all his flesh and blood came back into Brenner's heart. The friend missed a chord and broke the spell. Brenner turned around for a moment to look at the people in the chapel. Most of them were crying, too.

Afterwards, some of the relatives and some of Daniel's friends went to Louise and George's house. Brenner could not stand the sadness of talking about his son's death. He drove Gwen home and then he drove his mother home. Then he went back to his condo and made dinner for himself and drank too much wine. In the middle of the night he heard someone calling him as two men chased him through the stinging bushes and tree branches of an enormous black forest. He was naked and shoeless. He could taste the salty tang of blood in his mouth. There were stones and fragments of glass on the ground that cut his feet. Each time he stopped, the men beat at him with clubs and bats. He would fall

and they would stop, and he would get up and start to run again and they would chase him and beat him, and this cycle repeated without end because he wouldn't stay down and he refused to die. They shouted his name over and over again. Then the black forest dissolved suddenly into fog and he knew it was a dream. He opened his eyes. He was wet with the sweat of his dreaming.

The new world was difficult to navigate. He neglected Gwen and he knew it and he felt badly about it, but not badly enough to pick up the phone. On the other hand, she kept her distance. Perhaps she was tired of his heavy silences. She had a realistic view of relationships. The first time they had dinner together, she'd said *Romance is for the young and we're not young.*

Then she invited him for lunch one day late in June. The restaurant sat on pilings in the middle of a marina and had large models of sailboats suspended from the walls. It was a noisy, bustling place, a favourite hangout for business types. There were usually a few blondes in tight outfits and two or three tables of affluent tourists from Japan or Taiwan or Hong Kong, and always the intermittent ringing of cell phones and the exaggerated laughter of young women.

They sat side by side, on a banquet, not, as in the past, so Brenner could hold her hand or squeeze her thigh, but so that they could both look straight ahead.

"It's just not working," she said.

"No," he said.

"I feel badly. The timing is so bad."

"Yes," he said. "The timing is not good."

"But I think we're not good together. We haven't been for awhile."

Was she talking about the sex? Usually, Brenner would put up an argument, if only to get the details of her perspective on things. Now, it didn't seem to matter.

"Of course we knew from the beginning what we were getting into," she said.

"Yes," he said. Where was the waiter? He wanted more wine.

"You're not saying very much," she said.

"I'm very tired, Gwen."

She touched his hand in a gesture that almost seemed motherly. How quickly we move past sex, he thought. Had he left anything in her apartment?

"I really think this is for the best. Besides, I have new opportunities coming up— very exciting opportunities." Her voice changed to a brighter, more intense mode that excluded him. "Rolland is moving to LA. One of the studios is very interested in his recent work." Rolland was Gwen's ex, a filmmaker who'd gone to Toronto after the divorce to direct television commercials.

"You're moving to LA to be with Rolland?" For a moment he thought he was going to burst out laughing. "I thought you said he was a pretentious, self-absorbed ass."

"Oh, I did say that, didn't I? But then I say many things that are true at one point, and may or not be true at another point. Rolland is a different man than five years ago. Success has matured him."

"What are you going to do in Los Angeles? Can you work?"

"I think that will work itself out. If I can't sell real estate, I can sell something else."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Luxury cars. BMWs. Porsches."

“You don’t know a thing about cars.”

“That’s not the point. Selling is not about the thing you’re selling, it’s about the person you’re selling to.”

When the waiter refilled their glasses, Brenner told him to leave the bottle. He expected Gwen to object, but she didn’t. Wasn’t she going back to work after lunch? She moved closer to him on the banquet.

“I’m very excited,” she said. “Are you excited for me?”

Brenner thought it unthinkable to go back to someone you’d divorced. Even if there were no George, he couldn’t imagine being with Louise again. She knew his every flaw, every weak spot, every doubt, every failing. He couldn’t live with someone who knew him that well. In his new relationships he could present himself in a more controlled way, offer the best of himself and usually hide the worst. Surely that made for more happiness all around.

“Yes,” he said, realizing he’d forgotten the question.

They continued to drink. When they left the restaurant, it was almost three and the afternoon had been turned upside down and inside out. He would not be returning to the office. Gwen took his arm and guided him along the seawall, past the marina and then down a laneway to the side entrance to her building. They went inside and waited for an elevator. In the elevator, she covered his face in kisses. “That’s nice,” he said and he tried to remember how much he had drunk but he couldn’t remember.

In the bedroom she pulled the drapes shut against the summer light and took her clothes off. He shed his clothes and climbed into bed and pulled the covers over his head. He was tired and wanted to sleep. Gwen stretched out beside him; he felt the warmth of her breasts and

belly and legs against his skin. She ran a wet finger across his lips, down his chin, along his neck and onto his chest. “Our last time,” she said.

Brenner and Karyla sat in a small beige room that overlooked a parking lot. Karlya was alone. Brenner wondered what had happened to his Chinese partner but did not ask. Karlya was wearing the same dark suit he’d worn for the first visit. “The suspect,” Karlya said, “is a 17-year-old high school student. He has confessed to attacking your son with a baseball bat. There were two accomplices. One had a bat, the other a golf club. They’re all high school students.”

Brenner stared at the police detective, barely comprehending his words. Why would high school students beat his son to death? Because he was a naked gay man wearing running shoes?

“What is his name? The one you arrested?” Brenner said.

“Curtis Fielding. Of course under the Youth Criminal Justice Act his name cannot be revealed. I will ask that you cooperate completely with us in this respect.”

“Of course,” Brenner said.

“That includes any interaction with the media.” Karlya was staring at him, as though inspecting his face for hidden weapons. “Is that clear, Mr. Brenner?”

“Yes, of course it’s clear. I wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize—to affect the process.”

“That’s excellent.”

“What happens to him until the trial?”

“That depends on the judge. Typically—which is a rather strange thing to say because no case is typical, particularly this one—a young offender like CF is remanded to custodial supervision by his parents. His

movements are strictly controlled until the trial. He must be driven and from school or work by a parent. He is not allowed to have visitors or to visit friends. In some respects it's similar to house arrest."

"What will the charge be?"

"I don't know for certain at this point. I believe the crown prosecutor will ask for second-degree murder or manslaughter."

"And the penalty?"

"In court? Thirty-six months."

"Did you say thirty-six months?"

"Correct. Usually, that's two years in closed custody, one year conditional supervision."

"Closed custody—that's jail?"

"Not exactly. The youth equivalent—the secure custody centre in Burnaby."

"Let me understand this correctly. The maximum sentence for this young man is two years in a custody centre and a year at home with his parents?"

"Yes."

Brenner's mind began to reel. Three years! He knew that manslaughter applied to accidental homicides. You were in a bar, very drunk, you got into a fight, you punched a man, he fell and hit his head and then died. That was manslaughter. You killed someone without intending to. Without the full and complete intention of say, a serial killer. Brenner was trying to imagine and understand these scenarios but he was beginning to feel faint again. His head throbbed. He knew how important it was to have all the facts in this case and understand all the options. No mistakes could be allowed. What if someone made a

mistake? Would he have the insight to see this mistake or perhaps prevent it? Would he be listened to if he had something important to say?

“What is my role?” asked Brenner.

“What do you mean?”

“What is my role? What part do I play? How do I help in all of this?” Surely Karlya understood what was at stake for him, for the family, for everyone. *Justice must be done.*

“Well, you have the option of providing a victim impact statement. To be delivered during the trial. We have guidelines and examples.” He handed Brenner a blue and white pamphlet with the police department’s logo on the front.

“Is that all?” Brenner asked.

“For now, yes,” Karlya said. He collected his papers and stood up. “Shall I see you out?”

There were twenty three Fieldings in the phone book. Brenner sat in his living room and called each one in turn, asking *May I please speak to Curtis?* in a quiet voice that he assumed no one would recognize. How could anyone know what he sounded like? He worked his way down the list of numbers. Each time he punched in a set of numbers on the cell phone he paused for just a moment before pressing the Call key, in order to calm his heart. There was always the chance that Curtis himself might answer. What would he say then?

Five numbers did not answer. Ten numbers answered. Half of those apologized and said *Sorry you must have the wrong number* even though it was Brenner’s fault, not theirs. The other five said *Who?* Or *Who do you want to talk to?* But on the sixteenth call, a woman answered and said *Hello* in a bright, cheerful voice that reminded

Brenner of the voices on TV commercials. Brenner said *May I please speak to Curtis?* and when she said *Yeah, just a minute* he thought *yes this is it I have succeeded*. He waited very patiently. He heard the woman's voice in the background shouting at Curtis to come to the phone and then telling him she didn't know who the caller was, and suddenly, very quickly, the phone was still in Brenner's hand, pressed close to his ear and he was hearing a young man say *Hello* and this was the young man who had killed his son.

Brenner said nothing. Curtis said *Hello* again, more forcefully than the first time and then he sighed and said *Fuck* and hung up the phone.

Brenner was excited. He'd only heard three words from the young man but they were enough to create a kind of reality that hadn't existed before. How easy it had been to find him! Brenner looked at the phone book again and wrote the address down on a piece of paper, read it three times to memorize it, thought about putting the piece of paper in his wallet, then changed his mind and burned it in the fireplace.

After dinner he got into his car and drove through the darkness of the evening to the street where Curtis lived, on the east side of the city. The house was a modest postwar bungalow. Houses like this were sprinkled throughout the east side; they had brown or gray stucco exteriors and looked plain and a little ugly in Brenner's opinion. This one had bushes all across the front and a tidy rock garden next to the sidewalk. All the lights were on, including the porch light, but blinds covered every window.

Brenner drove to the end of the street, where a large cemetery stretched out under the sky. He turned the car around and drove back towards the Fielding house. He stopped on the opposite side, far enough

back to avoid being seen, but close enough to keep an eye on the front door. He sat and waited.

At 9:17 pm the front door opened. A middle-aged man with a baseball cap stepped out onto the front porch, followed by a younger, shorter man wearing blue jeans and a black windbreaker. Curtis and his father? A match flared and the two men lit cigarettes. The older man said something; Curtis shook his head. He had a crewcut and a thin bland face. They went down the steps and along the front walkway to the sidewalk in front of the house. The older man reached out and held Curtis by the shoulder and said something to him. Curtis shook his head again, dangled the cigarette in his mouth, and reached over and pried the man's fingers from his shoulders. Then he turned and walked away, down the sidewalk, towards the cemetery. The man stood and watched him then went back to the house and sat on the front step, smoking his cigarette.

Brenner waited a minute. The older man dropped his cigarette on the front walk and crushed it with his shoe, then got up and went back into the house. Brenner got out of the car and started to walk along the sidewalk towards the cemetery.

Curtis was standing directly under a streetlight at the entrance. There was a large trash barrel and a sign warning people not to litter. Curtis was still smoking. He stood facing north, towards the rolling open space of the cemetery that exposed the enormous night sky above and the twinkling lights of the mountain ski runs suspended in black space above the city. The wind was cold. Curtis had zipped up his jacket and now stood, cigarette dangling from his mouth, hands in his pockets, staring straight ahead at something in the distance.

Brenner walked past him, on the other side of the street, and then kept going. He walked into the cemetery for about a hundred yards, looked down at some of the tombstones embedded in the ground, looked up again at the night sky and the mountains to the north, then turned around and walked back out of the cemetery. He wasn't sure what he wanted to do or where he needed to go.

He began to walk more quickly. Then Curtis called out to him, "Hey, buddy, you got the time?" Brenner, taken by surprise, froze. He looked at Curtis. The boy was tapping his wrist with an index finger. "I said, you got the time?"

Brenner stared at him. Then he began to walk towards Curtis. He could do this. He knew he could do this and get away with it. "Sure, I got the time," Brenner said. He pushed up the sleeve of his jacket and looked at his watch. "Nine twenty one," he said.

"Thanks," Curtis said. "You wanna smoke?"

"No. No, thank you," Brenner said. He was looking him right in the face now. Yes, thin and bland. Younger than he looked before, standing on the porch. Was he really seventeen years old? He looked fourteen or fifteen. Not a line on his face. Terribly ordinary. He was shivering in the wind. He had dirty fingernails. His ears stuck out a bit.

"You live around here?"

"No," Brenner said. "Not even close."

"Fucking tedious neighbourhood if you ask me." He dropped the cigarette butt from his fingers and ground it under his shoe. "But I like the cemetery."

Brenner caught his eyes but only for a couple of seconds. He thought there might be something in see in those eyes, but what would any teenager give away? Even a normal teenager gave you nothing.

They refused to look at you. If Curtis was a monster, surely something would show in his eyes, something would give away what he had done? Brenner didn't understand. Wouldn't the guilt and shame be overwhelming? *Who did this and why?* Brenner needed the *why*. How much force would it take? A pair of hands around the throat, perhaps. His arms and hands were strong enough to raise the sail of his boat in 30 knots of wind, but would they be strong enough to extract the *why* from this boy?

Curtis turned away and began to walk back towards his house. Brenner waited, then went to his car and got in, fastened the seat belt and started the engine. Curtis was standing on the porch, smoking another cigarette. He watched Brenner drive by. Brenner turned and looked and thought he saw the boy signal with his hand. He almost waved in return, but stopped himself.

Caldwell, the crown prosecutor, had bargained with the boy's attorney to enter a plea of guilty to manslaughter on the condition the case stay in youth court, rather than be moved to adult court, where the punishment could be much more severe, four to six years. *No evidence*, he told Brenner. *There is absolutely no evidence whatsoever linking him to the crime or the crime scene. All we have is the confession. That, and the fact he's named the two other boys. Charges are pending. We're quite confident that's the sum total in this case, Mr. Brenner, three offenders.*

Caldwell wore a tight suit that bunched at the collar. His tie looked cheap and his white shirt, even at 9:30 in the morning, was wrinkled and creased. He stood at the small podium in front of the judge's bench talking to a colleague. He kept one hand in his pocket, as though he were playing with his car keys or an assortment of change.

When the boy came in, flanked by two lawyers, Caldwell turned and nodded his head but said nothing. The lawyers were chubby and fresh-faced, somewhere in their early forties perhaps; Brenner didn't recognize them because they were criminal lawyers and he was a business lawyer, opposite ends of the spectrum. He had checked the names; they meant nothing to him.

Curtis wore a well-cut dark blue suit, white shirt, blue tie. The suit looked expensive and brand new, and gave the boy a dignity and bearing beyond his years. How often these days did you see a teenage boy wearing a good suit? He had short hair, shorter than the time in the cemetery when Brenner had first met him, and the short hair made his ears seem even more prominent. Brenner could not take his eyes off the boy's face. He expected the boy to turn and stare, give him a flash of recognition or disdain or contempt, something to connect them but he did not. He took a seat in the centre of the courtroom. One of the lawyers sat beside him. The RCMP sergeant who sat by the far wall watched the boy carefully.

Brenner recognized the father as soon as he entered the courtroom. Brushcut, overweight, old leather jacket, freshly washed blue jeans, the face of a bus driver or a plumber? The wife was a sad, heavy woman who looked older than her husband. She was talking rapidly to her husband in a soft whispering voice that Brenner couldn't quite hear. The boy did not turn and acknowledge them. Both parents nodded at one of the defence lawyers and then took a seat in the front row.

They all stood up when the judge entered and then sat down again. The judge wore reading glasses and peered over them at the men in suits who were in charge of prosecution and defence in the case of Regina v. C.F. She had a brusque, clipped way of speaking that Brenner

thought appropriate to the proceedings; it suggested that time was of the essence, and that attempts to delay, procrastinate, or create obstacles of any kind would not be tolerated. *We're here and let's get on with it* she seemed to be saying.

Brenner closed his eyes for a moment when he heard the word guilty come out of the defence lawyer's mouth. *How does your client plead? Guilty, your honor.* And Brenner thought, she should ask how guilty. And order the boy to describe, right there in the courtroom, in front of everyone, the precise degree of guilt that he felt. The fact is that you not only killed my son, thought Brenner, you were the ring-leader, you were the one who led the murderous charge with a baseball bat, you were the one who struck the first blow, you were the one who chased Daniel through the bushes at midnight, who beat him as he ran and beat him again once he had fallen, you were the one who took my son's life. Yes, the others will be charged and punished, and yes they were accomplices, but you are the guiltiest, are you not? There are comparative and superlative levels of guilt. Guilty. Guiltier. Guiltiest. You are the one filled with so much hate that you had to destroy a life. How dare you! How dare you!

Brenner put his hands down by his sides and gripped the wooden seat of the bench. It was so very difficult to maintain control. The voices in the courtroom were discussing dates, assessment reports, psychiatric evaluations, pre-sentencing motions. The judge wanted to set a date for the sentencing hearing but the defence lawyers said they needed more time, this was a complex case, there was far too much to do, too many arrangements to make, too many people to contact, and certain experts were required, until the judge interrupted and said *We will not let this drag out until fall. We will meet again in four weeks and set a*

*date at that time.* The lawyers looked at each other, and then at the judge, and then said that was acceptable. The judge named a day and time and everyone consulted calendars and day timers and agreed on the day and time. Brenner took out his notebook and wrote it down.

There would be no trial. The boy had pleaded guilty and made a full confession. In youth court the next step was sentencing, when the full power of the legal system rested with the judge, who would pronounce sentence on the boy for what he had done, but there would be many documents from the defence arguing for understanding and leniency, that's what Caldwell had said. *They will argue he's basically a good kid who got drunk with his buddies, decided to beat up a gay man, and got carried away. The boy has no record. He's clean. A B student. Has a girlfriend. This won't be easy.*

Brenner was unable to get to his feet. The courtroom emptied. Caldwell came over and asked him if he was alright. He looked up into the younger man's face but said nothing. Caldwell touched his shoulder. *Can I get you something?* Brenner shook his head. *Are you sure?* Brenner said, *Go away.*

On the third day, Brenner sat in the back row of the courtroom and waited to read his statement to the court. George and Louise were sitting two rows ahead of him. His stomach fluttered up towards his throat but as soon as he sat in the witness chair and laid the stapled pages of double-spaced text on the wooden shelf in front of him, he regained his control and composure. The judge asked him to identify himself and his relationship to the deceased. Brenner did so. The judge asked him to proceed. Brenner put his reading glasses on and began to read.

The profound silence of the room reminded him of Daniel's memorial service. He held their attention by right and by force of convention; no one could stop him, no one could interrupt him, no one could alter what he was saying or how he said it. Each time Brenner paused, after a phrase like *our lives are changed forever* or *the deep despair and anguish that I feel* he heard in this deep silence a kind of vacuum that threatened to suck his words down into nothingness. Every figure in the room was frozen in place. Curtis with his head down again. George staring at him. Louise staring down at her hands.

When he finished speaking, he let go of the pages he had been reading from, removed his reading glasses and placed his hands on his lap. The crown counsel thanked him. Brenner nodded and got up and went back to his seat. As he passed Curtis he wanted to reach out with one hand and slap his head or touch him in some gesture of disapproval or anger but he did not. The urge to make a scene, to strike back, swelled up quickly inside him but disappeared just as quickly.

Caldwell got him a copy of the confession. It was double spaced and took up twenty full pages. It was filled with repeated words, umms and ahhs, gaps, interruptions, hesitations. When the detective said *Where did you hit him, Curtis?* Curtis replied *Ah, I don't know, I just hit him you know* but the detective kept repeating the question and finally Curtis said *In the back, you know, I think I hit him first in the back.* Brenner read page after page of this question and answer until Curtis had described every blow rendered to Daniel's body.

Brenner reminded himself as he read the confession that his first question about the death had been *Who did this and why* and now the who was known, and even the how was known, twenty-one bruises on

his son's body created by twenty-one blows from a bat and a golf club. But what about the why? Brenner deserved to know the why. He read the confession three times, from beginning to end, and he could find only a couple of lines from Curtis that could explain what he had done. The detective asked him if he had gone to the park before with his friends armed with weapons and Curtis had said, *Sure, once or twice*. The detective asked why and Curtis said *Just for fun, you know, something to do* and the detective said *Is that the only reason, Curtis?* and Curtis said *I don't know we were drunk* and the detective said *But why this man, why Daniel Brenner?* and Curtis said *I don't know, we were drunk, it was for fun* and the detective said *Was it because he was naked, no clothes?* and Curtis said *Yeah, that was it, he was fucking naked* and the detective said *He was naked and walking around the park and that's why you attacked him?* and Curtis said *I don't know, yeah, I guess so* and the detective said *Weren't you looking for gays?* And Curtis said *No, not gays, that wasn't it, we just looking for peeping toms, you know, the guys that look in car windows*. And the detective said *But he was naked; didn't you assume he was gay?* And Curtis said *No, we were just drunk, like I said, we were just drunk*.

Brenner got a yellow marker and highlighted this part of the confession. He needed to read it over and over until it made some kind of sense to him. He had done foolish things when he was drunk: driven off the road into a ditch, scalded his hand under hot water, burned a finger on the stove, lost his balance on the bow of the boat while checking the anchor line, many things, and many sexual things because alcohol aroused him. Yes, he could see how you could lose control sexually when you were drunk. But why would you pick up a baseball bat and hit someone hard enough to kill them?

The judge's ruling was posted on the Internet six weeks later. Curtis received the maximum sentence under the law, two years in secure detention in a youth prison, and one year supervised custody at home. The judgment contained excerpts from the confession and excerpts from several of the pre-sentencing reports. The judge wrote that he was *shocked and horrified by the callous disregard for human life shown by the defendant, and equally shocked by his ability to convince social workers and psychologists that he was a normal, reasonably well-adjusted seventeen-year-old boy.*

Brenner understood clearly that the judge had been constrained by the law. But only two years in jail! These words had been buzzing in his brain since the day of the arrest. Caldwell had said the boy, if tried in youth court, would receive the maximum sentence. But the certainty of the sentence meant very little if the sentence itself was flawed. Surely Daniel's life was worth more than two years. Surely at seventeen you were mature enough to be held fully accountable for your actions. In the past, wasn't seventeen was old enough to marry, father children, go to sea, fight in a war?

Two years! He couldn't get these words out of his mind. Two years!

He printed out the judgment from the court web site and read it over and over. The judge had made no mention of the victim impact statements. This was disappointing. But his harsh words gave some moral reality to Daniel's death. Louise was quoted in a newspaper story as saying that *the length of the sentence is irrelevant because nothing will bring back my son. I have forgiven this young man his horrible crime and pray every day that God will save his soul.*

A year passed. On the anniversary of his son's death, Brenner got into his car and drove to the cemetery. At the entrance, he stopped the car. He wasn't sure he could go in. He wanted a drink very badly. If he turned around now he could be at the liquor store in less than fifteen minutes. He would only need one glass of wine, two at the most. Just to settle his nerves. What was the harm in that?

A BMW convertible coming from the other direction turned into the cemetery. He caught a glimpse of the driver, a woman with short red hair and trendy black glasses. She stared at him as she made the turn, and he felt embarrassed that he'd stopped in the middle of the road. A truck came up from behind and honked. He put the car back into gear and turned into the cemetery.

He parked by the side of the grove. The sunshine was very bright. He'd forgotten his sunglasses. He walked into the shade of the tall fir trees that sheltered the marble walls containing the remains of the dead. He sat on the bench and looked at the name of his son and the dates of his son's life. He bowed his head for a moment. How many times had he thought about Daniel in the last year? An uncountable number. Was there a single memory he had not examined? No. His brain was exhausted by the task of remembrance. He assumed there would be no end to it. Grief was like a telescope, examining every detail of a steadily receding planet.

Brenner stared at his hands. He had a fresh scar near the index finger knuckle of his left hand, the reminder of a bloody gash caused by jamming his hand against a fluke of the anchor while locking it into position on the bow of the boat. He often cut his hands while sailing.

This scar had no particular meaning except to remind Brenner of another cut to his hand, caused by a falling drywall knife, that had left no

scar. When Daniel turned sixteen he took an overdose of sleeping pills. *He's depressed*, the psychologist said, *but he is responding to treatment. We have every hope for a good outcome.* One evening after Brenner and his wife had gone to bed, Daniel fashioned a noose from a length of nylon rope which he tied to the ceiling in the workshop in the basement of the house on Cornwall Street, the house that Louise hated because the yard was so much work and the basement had flooded twice even after they'd replaced the weeping tiles. The renovator had suggested closing in all the ceilings in the basement, but Brenner had said no, better to leave the workshop ceiling exposed so the plumber could reach the hot and cold water pipes in the event of a leak but the more important reason had to do with the fact that the renovation was already forty per cent over budget and he didn't want to spend the money. So the ceiling was left uncovered.

Brenner was in bed but not asleep when he heard the sound. For a second he wasn't sure if he'd heard something or imagined it. Old houses were filled with strange sounds. He stared at a rectangle of light on the bedroom wall and then thought *Yes, that is a sound, a human sound, that's Daniel.* He felt a prickle of fear run up the back of his neck. He got up quickly, put a bathrobe on and went to the basement where he found his son trapped by the noose, with both hands on the water pipe that ran the length of the ceiling. Daniel's eyes were closed. Brenner grabbed a drywall knife, put the chair back in place, stood up and cut the rope. Daniel fell into his arms. The knife slipped from his hand and cut him, and they both fell heavily onto the floor, Brenner on the bottom, his son on top.

Brenner was knocked out for a moment. When he opened his eyes again, his head hurt terribly. His left hand was bleeding. They were

still on the floor. He could hear footsteps from somewhere in the house. That would be Louise. His arms were around his son. Daniel lifted his head for a moment, looked at his father, and began to cry. Brenner held his son more tightly, and felt the heat of his tear-stained face. *He does want to live*, Brenner thought, *He does want to live*.

Curtis had not heard this story. Brenner thought he must tell it to the young man at some point. But when and how to tell it?

Brenner could still feel the weight of Daniel lying on top of him. How could that be? He opened his eyes again and looked around. The May afternoon was unchanged; the sun shone as brightly as before. High in the branches above him he could hear birds singing. He closed his eyes. Daniel's body now seemed lighter and more comfortable in his arms. If he wanted, he could pull the boy even closer.

"Excuse me. Mr. Brenner?"

A woman's voice. He opened his eyes. She was standing off to the side, a red-haired woman dressed in gray holding a black purse. Tall. Sleek. Mid-forties perhaps. The woman he'd seen in the car. "Yes?" he said.

"I don't mean to disturb you."

What did she want? "No," he said. "I'm already—disturbed." A small joke. She didn't react.

"You are Paul Brenner?"

"Yes."

"We have a friend in common." She mentioned a name, someone that Brenner had done legal work for. "May I sit down?"

He nodded. She sat down beside him. He could smell her perfume.

"I lost my daughter to cancer five years ago," she said.

"I'm sorry."

"She's there—over there." The woman pointed to the north, beyond the grove somewhere. "She has a small headstone. I leave flowers. Do you leave flowers for your son, Paul?"

"No."

"But you need to do something. What do you do?"

"I remember."

"That gets harder. That's the saddest thing of all."

"What do you mean?"

"It just becomes harder to remember."

He shook his head. "Not for me. I remember more clearly than ever before."

"Everything?"

"Of course not everything. Just the important things."

Brenner fell silent for a moment. Then he turned and faced the woman. "Your daughter—how old was she when she died?"

"Ten. Only ten."

Brenner wished he hadn't asked. At least Daniel had lived his twenty-seven years. To lose a ten-year-old child would be too much to bear.

"And how do you—how do you stand it?"

She looked directly into his eyes. "I do not stand it." She put her head down again. "I miss my daughter every day—every single day."

"I understand," he said.

She began to cry. He wanted to comfort her with wise words, but he had none. She knew more about grief than he did. He moved closer to her on the bench and touched her shoulder.

"Do you need kleenex?" he asked.

“No,” she said, “I always bring too much.”

He sat with her for a few minutes more and then she dried her eyes for the last time, got up very slowly and walked back to her car.

He drove home. At the first red light, he took his hands off the wheel and held them in the air. They were steady. He didn't want a drink. He didn't need a drink.

Brenner and his client were having lunch in a restaurant in a hotel owned by the client. Brenner hated the place because the service was poor and the food mediocre.

“I have to fire you,” the client said.

Brenner nodded, as though giving assent. In the past, bad news like this would have forced him to superimpose calm and logic on a difficult situation. But now he had no reaction, just a mild curiosity. They were only playing Monopoly. Did the client understand that?

“We're moving to a more integrated operating model,” the client said. “Starting next quarter, all legal services will be provided internally.”

“Did you consider offering me the job?”

The client looked out the window. A woman in a short skirt was walking down the sidewalk. The client stared at her. She gave him a dirty look and turned away again.

The client smiled at Brenner. “Would you have taken the job if I had offered it you?”

“No,” said Brenner. “Of course not.”

“Well then.” The client carefully lined up the silver cutlery on the white tablecloth in front of him. “The salmon is very good here,” he said.

“We fly it in from the Charlottes, twice a week.”

“So it's frozen,” Brenner said.

“Of course,” the client said.

The crown prosecutor’s office told him that Curtis was to be released from the custody centre shortly after 11 am. Brenner had no pressing business at the office so he arrived early, and waited in his car on the opposite side of the street. He played a Fats Waller CD while he waited. Fats was singing *Your feet’s too big* when he saw Curtis come through the main doors, his father right beside him, gripping his left arm, his mother following close behind. Where were the police? Surely the police would be part of the escort? Brenner watched. There were no police. Curtis and his parents got into a black sedan parked at the curb directly in front of the building. The engine started. Curtis slumped in the back seat, his head down as though nodding off. A puff of exhaust dirtied the air and the car disappeared down the street.

Brenner waited a few days, and then one evening, after eating dinner with his mother, he kissed her good night and drove to the street where Curtis lived. He drove to the end of the street, where the cemetery began, turned around and came back and parked close enough to the house to have a clear view of the front door. It was dark, after eight, but the air was still warm. He kept the CD player turned low, with just enough volume to hear the voice of the blues singer. It was raw music, with no finesse, no subtleties, but he liked it. He listened to the guitar and thought about drinking, then pushed that thought away.

The door opened at 10:16. Curtis came out alone and stood under the porch light for a moment. His clothes looked new. He had a cap on his head. Was he thinner than before? It was hard to tell. Curtis took a package of cigarettes out of the pocket of his shirt, removed one

and lit it. He blew the smoke up at the light, then walked down the steps to the sidewalk.

Brenner waited a minute or so, and then got out of the car and followed him. The sky was clear. He could see the faint patterns of stars shining down on the cemetery. Curtis stood by a streetlight, staring north towards the mountains. Brenner walked past him and then turned around and came back. Why was his heart beating so quickly? He knew exactly what he wanted to say.

“Excuse me, do you have the time?” he said.

Curtis turned around. His face was very pale. Brenner hated the paleness of the boy’s face, its blandness, its inability or unwillingness to express anything. If he slapped the boy, would he react? Would he fight back?

“What do you want?” Curtis said.

“I just asked you for the time.”

“I know. But what do you want?” He took a deep drag on his cigarette and blew the smoke toward Brenner. “What do you want, Mister Brenner?”

Brenner moved closer. The boy stared at him. When he just a few feet away, he could see that the boy’s face was thinner than before, and a meagre ridge of stubble along the jaw line gave him a seedy, grubby air. His words sounded slurred. Had he been drinking?

The boy spoke again. “I don’t have to talk to you.”

“I know. But I think you want to.”

Curtis laughed, and then coughed.

“Cigarettes are very bad for you,” Brenner said. “I used to smoke. I used to drink too. Just like you.”

“Fuck you,” Curtis said. But his hands were trembling.

"I think we should talk." Brenner's heart had slowed down. He felt almost calm. The boy could not hurt him again, could he? "I think we should talk about my son."

"I've done enough of that," Curtis said. "Enough talking. Fuck. Everybody wants to talk. Nobody wants to do anything."

"Talking is good."

"But I don't have to talk to you. Even a year from now I don't have to talk to you. Three years, that's my time. Three years of my fucking life."

Curtis finished his cigarette and flicked it into the street.

Brenner sighed. He was very close to the boy, close enough to touch. Why didn't Curtis move away?

"Listen, please, Curtis." Brenner reached out and touched his arm. "Please listen."

"Don't touch me," he said, but he didn't move away. "What do you want?"

"My son is dead. Look at me, Curtis." He held the boy by the arm and repeated the words and then Curtis did look at him.

"My son is dead."

Curtis could not hold his stare. He looked down at the ground. "I know," he said, very quietly. "I know, I know, I know."

"Are you sorry?"

Silence. Brenner repeated his question.

"Yes." The word was barely a whisper. "Yes, I am sorry."

Was the boy going to cry? He was still looking down at the ground.

"I just need to know—" Before Brenner could finish his sentence, the boy dropped to his knees and stayed there. He was kneeling in front

of Brenner. Brenner touched his shoulder. He thought the boy was sobbing but he wasn't sure.

"Curtis," he said. "Please, I just need to know why—"

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Brenner, startled by a man's voice, turned away from Curtis. The father was standing in the street a few yards away.

"Dad, I'm just—"

"I'm not talking to you Curtis, I'll deal with you in a minute. I'm talking to this guy."

The father walked towards them, a bit unsteady. He almost tripped on the curb, then recovered his balance and walked right up to Brenner and stood in front of him. Brenner was afraid. Why was this man so upset?

The father was pointing at him. "You. I asked you a question and you haven't answered it yet."

"Stay calm, please," Brenner said. The man grinned insanely at him. Was he drunk? Stoned? Brenner wanted to back away, get to his car, get to safety. Coming here was a mistake, a wretched unalterable mistake. He could feel his heart in his chest now.

"I'm talking to your son—to Curtis."

"My son, the little shit, is under my supervision. He doesn't move an inch without my knowing about it. Right, Curtis?"

Curtis nodded.

"Stand up." Curtis got to his feet.

"Fuck, the shit I have to put up with." He pointed his finger again at Brenner. "You shouldn't be talking to my son. You need my permission. Do you understand?"

Brenner said "Yes, I understand, I meant no harm."

“You meant no harm? You meant no harm?” The man laughed. He was poking his finger directly into Brenner’s chest. Brenner could smell his foul breath, see the web of lines radiating out from his eyes, feel his heavy power of his anger. He knew he could still run away, still get back to this car. But he would have to move quickly, and he seemed for some reason unable to move.

The man was pushing him now, pushing him backwards into the darkness of the cemetery. As Brenner stepped back he began to feel very afraid. What did this man intend to do to him?

“Dad, stop.” Curtis was moving. Brenner could see him now. He could see the man and the son, the two faces, very clearly.

“You fucking destroyed my son’s life. You and your faggot son. Lawyers! I know all about you. Twist everything you get your hands on and then charge an arm and a leg for it.”

The man was pushing him so hard than he could barely stay upright. How could he run? That would be cowardly. He had to stand his ground.

“Please,” Brenner said. He stopped stepping backwards, and the man, so close to him they were almost in each other’s arms, quickly punched him once, very hard, in the stomach. Brenner bent over, sucked desperately to pull air into his lungs and failed, and then fell to the ground, and as he hit the ground his stomach released and then air came into his lungs again. He took another huge, gasping breath and was about to put his hands to his stomach, to massage the awful pain that he felt there, when a sharp blow landed on his ribs and he realized the man was kicking him. Why was he doing that? Brenner tried to protect himself with his arms but then the man kicked him in the head

and so he moved his arms to his head, and then felt another terrible blow to his ribs.

“Please,” he said, gasping for breath again, “please stop.”

Curtis was yelling something. Brenner couldn't see, but the blows had stopped. He opened his eyes and looked up. Curtis was pushing his father away, away from Brenner and back towards the street. The man's head was still bobbing in rage. He tried to slap his son and failed. Curtis kept pushing him, yelling “Go home, go home!” and then there was silence and Brenner closed his eyes for a moment. He touched his head and felt something wet.

“Mr. Brenner, are you alright?”

He opened his eyes again and saw Curtis crouched in front of him.

“Can you get up?”

“I don't know.”

“Should I call an ambulance or something?”

Brenner didn't want to deal with a hospital, doctors, questions, too many questions. He wanted to get up and then he wanted to find his car and get in and go home.

Curtis helped him to a bench a few yards away. His ribs hurt terribly. He thought he'd probably broken something. But the cut on his head had stopped bleeding. He pulled a kleenex from his pocket and daubed his forehead a few times to make sure the bleeding had stopped. His head hurt terribly. He wanted to go home.

“My father—he gets angry—“

“I want—can you—just help me to my car.”

“You can't drive.”

“Just help me—help me to my car. Please.”

Curtis put his arm around Brenner and helped him walk the half block to his car. He opened the door and removed the keys from Brenner's jacket, and helped Brenner into the passenger side. Then he went around to the driver's side of the car and got in.

"You can't—you can't do this." Brenner was struggling to keep his eyes open. He heard the engine start and felt the car begin to move. Curtis asked him where he lived. He told him. Some time passed. When he opened his eyes again, Curtis was helping him out of the car and through the front door of his building. They went into the elevator.

In the condo, Curtis helped him into the bedroom. He removed his jacket and helped him down onto the bed.

Curtis said, "I need cab fare, OK?" and Brenner nodded and pointed at his jacket. Curtis took out the wallet and removed some money.

Brenner lay on the bed and counted each breath and then passed out.

He'd broken the third rib from the bottom, on the left side. The heart side. The bandages were uncomfortable and the pills that he took to dull the pain made him so drowsy he spent most of the week in bed. When he phoned Grace for his messages every day, her voice sounded friendly but distant as though she already knew his decision.

*And what was that? Let them find someone else to buy and sell their hotels.*

On Friday, Grace called him as he was getting ready to leave for dinner with his mother.

He was impatient with her. "What do you want?" he said.

“The Fairfax closing is in two weeks. Jollings is having a fit because you’re not around. He’s called six times today.”

“Did you tell him I will call him on Monday?”

“Yes, but he’s very upset. He wanted your home number.”

Brenner sighed. He touched his rib very lightly with a finger and winced. Why was it taking so long to heal? He looked at his watch. His mother was very fussy about eating on time.

“Is Atkins still in the office?”

“Yes.”

“Transfer me.”

Brenner waited a moment, then heard Atkins’s voice come on the line. “Paul, I hope you’re feeling better.”

“I want you to handle a closing for me. Can you do that?”

“I don’t know, I’m very busy—“

“Do it and he’s all yours—it’s a single property purchase agreement, all the documents are in the file. Grace can show you where. It’s very straightforward.”

“But you’ll be back Monday—“

“I don’t know.”

Atkins didn’t say anything. He needed the work. Why wouldn’t he welcome a new client like Jollings?

“How much are we talking about?” Atkins asked.

“Annual billings?”

“Yeah.”

Brenner thought for a moment. “Two hundred,” he said. “I’d say two hundred hours a year.”

“Any billing issues?”

"No," Brenner said. "He pays on a time. He'll talk your ear off, but he always pays on time."

"Always?"

"Yes. Now, you can get the rest of the information from Grace. I have to go—"

"No, no, Paul, listen I need more. When you will be in?"

"I have to go. Talk to Grace."

He put the phone down. Jollings would be upset until Atkins told him his hourly rate. Then everything would be fine.

A letter arrived a few days later. It came in a plain white business-sized envelope, with Brenner's name and address carefully printed in blue ink on the outside. There was no return address. He opened it quickly. A single piece of paper, folded in thirds, with a twenty-dollar bill paperclipped to the corner.

Brenner read the letter, *Dear Mr. Brenner this is the money I took for the taxi and I hope you didn't think that I wasn't going to pay you back or think I am not an honest person. I am an honest person and try always to pay people back. You might not believe this. You probably hate me for what I did and I can't blame you at all for any of that. My father is sorry for what he did to you but he will never admit it. It is not a lie to say I think about what happened to Daniel every day and I know this will not change for the rest of my life and I am very truly sorry. Yours sincerely Curtis Fielding.*

Brenner felt faint so he went to the chesterfield in the living room and sat down for a moment. He put the letter on the coffee table and placed the twenty-dollar bill beside the letter. He stared at them both for a few moments. Nothing could bring Daniel back. He had thought this

many times. Every time, an overwhelming wave of grief and guilt would wash over him. But now time had passed and his thoughts went to Curtis for some reason. How would he live the rest of his life? Brenner hadn't considered this before. The boy was only nineteen. What if he needed help? Who would be there to help him?

Brenner folded the letter again and put it back into the envelope. He was about to throw it in the trash when he stopped, turned around, and went into the bedroom. He opened the drawer of the bedside table and put the letter inside. He sat down on the bed and began to cry.

*Hold Me Now won the 2008 Prairie Fire Short Fiction prize, and will be appear in the 2010 Best Canadian Short Stories, edited by John Metcalf.*

*The story is based loosely on the 2001 murder of Aaron Webster a Vancouver gay man beaten to death by three young men.*