



*"This is," the pharmacist said, "why you're here?"*

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## WATERTOWN

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Babe hated her. Babe hated her and they loved him. Hay and Eddie noted and imitated everything he did — tried to wear the same suits, ordered the same drinks. They wanted to keep up but never could. Babe was too fast, too rich, and too huge. After ten, fifteen drinks, he would tell them — never remembering their names — about Helen: How she was embarrassing him, how shameless she was, how she knew who he was when she married him, so how come she pretended she'd been sold a false bill of goods? — and they could tell by the way his broad nostrils flared and his wide forehead creased that he hated her.

Into the back of Hay's rusted Dodge truck they tossed a case of beer, a thick length of rope, and two shotguns.

The two hundred and fifty mile drive from New York to Watertown, Massachusetts should have taken Hay and Eddie a day, but Hay never let Eddie drive, the snow kept them at a reasonable speed, and they stopped along the way to eat and drink, tossing money around as if they were Babe, and they ended up driving into the center of Watertown as the sun was just beginning to light the sky. The empty bottles clinked in the back as their tires skidded over the ice onto Main Street, a quaint, tree-lined drive with brick buildings on either side.

While Hay went into the five and dime to inquire about Helen's whereabouts, Eddie relieved himself on the side of the building. He yawned. His hand shook. He'd been sobering up, the beer sloshing around in his head, and as he waded through the haze, he found himself in a strange town, ready to kill someone he'd never met. His hands were icy as he put himself back in his pants and buttoned them.

Inside, Hay asked the pharmacist where he might find Helen. The pharmacist straightened his white jacket, ran both of his palms over the sides of his hair – smoothing it – and sighed.

“You a newspaperman?” the pharmacist asked.

“Buddy, I couldn’t read a paper if you slapped some glasses on me and called me Professor,” Hay answered and smiled.

“Who are you then?” the pharmacist asked.

“Family friend,” Hay said. “We heard she’s in a bad way.”

This eased the pharmacist’s suspicion, and he got a boy who skulked behind the counter to fetch Hay a cup of muddy coffee while he found Helen’s address. The pharmacist and Eddie arrived at the same time, and the pharmacist blinked in quick succession, his eyelids fluttering. Then he told the two men that Helen had been staying with a dentist in town. “He keeps her in her pills,” the pharmacist said. “I stopped filling his prescriptions long ago – even for his legitimate patients.”

Hay gave what looked like a genuine, sad nod of compassion.

“This is,” the pharmacist said, “why you’re here?”

Hay nodded his head, flicked the tip of a match and held the new flame to a hand-rolled cigarette. He spit some of the loose tobacco onto the tiles of the store where it peppered the melted snow they’d tracked in on their boots. The address had been scrawled on a prescription pad. Hay took a few steps back and waited for Eddie to take the address from the pharmacist’s hand.

Eddie knew poking around and showing their faces shortly before they killed the Babe’s ex-wife would surely be their undoing. But what did he have to lose? His job cracking skulls seven nights a week for girlie bars in Manhattan? His apartment, which he left messy to give the illusion of occupation? His days spent wandering around the park, his hands jammed into his pockets? No, Eddie would miss none of this if he got sent upstate again.

The last time he’d been caught one foot in, one foot out of the window of the local hardware store. In his pocket, he’d held a wad

of cash no bigger than a woman's fist. For that, he slept on a cot in a cell surrounded by six-foot-thick cinderblock walls, and a twenty-foot fence lined with gun turrets outside of that, and beyond that, incongruous fields of sunflowers and corn. Some days, he'd stand at the edge of that fence and listen to the rustling of the stalks.

He'd never killed anyone before, but as they'd driven he realized this had more to do with opportunity and less with morals than he would've readily admitted—even to himself. So he grabbed the address, flipped it over as if the pharmacist might have written something on the other side (he hadn't), and followed Hay outside to the Dodge. They consulted the map that Hay had stuck under his coat as they'd left. Helen and her dentist friend were only five blocks away. The gap looked tiny to Eddie, no more than a fingernail. His brow began to sweat despite the chill, and he drew his forearm across it.

Hay flicked his cigarette out the window as they drove back onto the main road and on to Helen's house. It took less than three minutes.

The house stood, plain and white, in the middle of more ornate, gabled affairs. The weight of the snow seemed to threaten to crush the structure—the pillars were crooked, the porch hung in the shape of a V, and half the shingles were missing. Hay didn't cut the engine right away, and a small spark of hope alighted in Eddie's chest. It crept up his throat, and he was about to say, "Why don't we turn around?" when Hay turned the key with a spasmodic flick of his wrist and the truck ceased its rumblings.

Hay took a comb from his pocket and straightened his hair, then slapped his hat back over the whole black mess of it. They walked on a barely worn footpath in the snow to the front door.

Hay waited. He wasn't nervous. The doorknocker had fallen to the ground and Eddie thought of the shark's jawbone he'd once found on the beach at Coney Island as a kid.

Eddie knocked with his fist.

No one came.

Eddie knocked again, harder.

Footsteps—unsure, shuffling footsteps—sounded through the house. They heard the latch being undone, and the door opened slowly. In the dank, dim apartment stood a woman, her features wasted away in a manner Eddie and Hay'd seen plenty of in their Brooklyn neighborhood. Her eyes were dull, her hair like hay, missing in clumps, and her skin was oily and peppered with blemishes on her face and arms, but dried and cracked on her joints and her hands. Her robe wasn't drawn tight enough to hide the sagging neckline of her nightgown, exposing a fragile collarbone and a pale blue vein that snaked its way through the center of it.

"What?" she said.

"You Helen?" Hay asked her, and smiled. He removed his hat from his head and let his hair slide across his brow, falling just short of blocking his eyes.

"Yeah?" She shifted what little weight she had, and her hip came poking out through the thin cotton dress she wore.

"Well, ma'am, we're here from the local apothecary," Hay said, "and we wanted to ask you a few questions."

Helen scratched her arm. The skin turned strawberry red. She disappeared from the door, but left it open. They heard her mumble something about a delivery and followed her inside.

The interior of the house smelled of medicine and rot. The drapes and shades were all drawn, and the light that peeked around the edges exposed air thick with dust. Helen collapsed on an upholstered chair and sent more dust into the air. Next to her, on a small end table covered in linen, sat a cigar box. A short length of rubber tubing—black and dull—protruded from the carton. Hay and Eddie took all of this in, as a heavy-lidded Helen crossed her legs and pulled her robe over her knees. "A little too late for decorum," Hay said to Eddie under his breath. Hay leaned closer and whispered instructions to him—find the bathroom, find the bedroom, find all of the drugs and gather them up.

Happy to be excused, Eddie slipped out. The stairs popped and cracked with his steps, even when he walked on their edges. The

drapes were open in the small guest room, which had one lone window. The roof slanted down across half of the room, giving it an unbalanced feel that furthered the unease in Eddie's stomach. A pair of men's shoes were aligned next to the bed. In the closet, two white, starched shirts, two suits, and one white dentist's jacket hung from wire hangers. The dresser held nothing but men's clothing in its drawers. Eddie was not a smart man, but even he knew what this meant: Helen did not share a bed with the dentist. He didn't know if this would make Babe feel better. Would this ease some of the embarrassment? To know that he hadn't been turned over for another man?

In the master bedroom he found all of Helen's clothes — expensive, by the looks of them. Eddie leaned into the closet and let his face sink into the soft fabrics, inhaling the floral scent of Helen's perfume. In the bedside table were bottles of prescriptions, none of them full, some empty, some clinking with a few stray pills. The labels bore many different patient names and addresses, all within the quaint confines of Watertown.

The shadows cast by the trees outside the window danced in the breeze. No one moved on the snowy sidewalks.

Eddie had grown up in a town sort of like this one, on a narrow, tree-lined street in Connecticut. He'd been a rough-and-tumbler, the kind of kid who craved a little trouble. When they ran out of trouble in his town — locked doors, cops always on the lookout — he made his way to New York, where there was plenty to go around, even after he'd met Hay.

They'd somehow ended up on the same side of a scrap one night, and after they emerged from a night in jail, their eyes squinting in the early summer morning, Hay shoved a thick wad of tobacco in his cheek and said, "You want we should go to the ballgame? I know a guy."

A few minutes later Eddie found himself emerging from the tunnel and into the stadium, the field spread out before him like a blanket of rare jewels. It glowed. It took him a moment to come back to reality — people shoved at his back.

“Hold your goddamn horses,” Hay said to the crowd building behind them, appreciating Eddie’s awe, folding his arms and appraising the field as well. Even in his enraptured state, Eddie was aware of the way people actually listened, and waited until they’d had their fill.

Babe hit two homers that day, his fat body waddling around the bases much faster than Eddie thought possible for such a large man. His hands swept his forty-two ounce Louisville Slugger through the air like it was a flyswatter, nothing more.

The crack of the bat was like a gunshot.

Eddie found a pillowcase and threw all the bottles he could find inside the worn cotton. He found more underneath the bed, scattered like empty bullet casings after a shootout. More were in the pockets of coats in the closet, more stuffed inside purses.

The heft of the pillowcase grew by the minute. Eddie shook it, a satisfying rattle emerging from the fabric. But another noise grew beneath it. He set the pillowcase on the bed. Downstairs, he could hear the rumble of Hay’s voice. He sounded angry. Eddie hadn’t seen Hay angry all that often—most of the time people got scared long before Hay got too riled. Hay could also maintain calm with a frightening steadiness. In a bar one night, hoping to see Babe, Hay got into it with one of the bartenders, and before Eddie knew what happened, Hay had broken his shotglass and with a clean swipe and twist of his hand, sliced out the man’s eye. The bloody orb dangled from the man’s face, and Hay, still calm, adjusted his cuffs and dropped his coins on the slick bar.

Downstairs in the home of the dentist, Hay stood over Helen, who seemed nonplussed by his anger. It took Eddie’s eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness, but when they did he saw how truly unhinged Hay had become, his eyes wild and roaming, his hair mussed, his face crimson.

“You’re an embarrassment,” Hay said, “and you’ll deserve all that you get.”

Helen swatted a hand in front of her face, as if Hay were nothing

more than a fly. Hay lost it. He squatted, yanked her arms over his shoulders, and hefted her like a child's doll. Helen — for her part — did not squeal or scream. As she passed, Eddie looked her in the eye and the pupils were grand black pools, the irises thin as paper, the whites unshining.

Eddie followed Hay upstairs, where he dumped Helen into the bathtub, her head just missing the faucet but hitting the side, the porcelain cracking, the iron beneath echoing with a sickening ring. Hay flipped on the water. Helen fought now, thrashing about in the water like a fish in the bottom of a boat. One hand was all it took for Hay to hold her down. With the other, he yanked the curtains from the window and the sudden influx of blinding, snow-reflected sunlight made them all squint. The tub — a deep, claw-footed basin — filled with water, and the deeper it got, the less Helen struggled.

Finally, Hay shut off the water, and — though Eddie felt certain he still heard the tub ringing — the only sound in the room was the last few drips of the faucet and Helen's uneven breathing. Her robe ballooned around her, some air still trapped inside. Hay's hand produced a switchblade from somewhere — Eddie'd seen it, once or twice, the blade flashing out in the center of a brawl — and sliced her nightdress from its hem to its neckline. Then, with an almost tender motion, he pulled the fabrics out from under her, leaving her in her underclothes.

"Who are you?" Helen asked.

"We're friends of the Babe," Hay said.

"You?" Helen said. "The two of you?" She began to laugh, and the movement set the water sloshing.

Eddie felt ill. He stood in the doorway, his hand on the knob.

"He sent you to clean me up?" Helen said. "How charming."

The croak was gone from her voice, replaced by an acidic sharpness.

Hay rolled up his sleeve and reached out a large, dirty hand and dunked Helen in the water. He held her down for a moment. When he let go, she surfaced slowly. She hacked and coughed.

Water sloshed over the side of the tub and dripped through the hole in the toe of Eddie's boot. This seemed to wake him. He and Hay had tussled about a dozen times, and each ended with them both sucking wind and swearing at the other, stuck at a stalemate.

"Hello?" someone called from downstairs.

Hay nodded for Eddie to go. Eddie took a look at Helen, then left the room. He checked the clock in the hallway—a bit before noon.

The dentist sat at the kitchen table, eating a sandwich, using the deli paper as a placemat. An open bottle of milk sweated condensation. The dentist was small and soft, with thick hair he kept short. His eyebrows slunk together when he saw Eddie. The dentist weighed his options, then, taking a bite of the sandwich, he said, "I should've known when I heard the tub. I was just happy she might be bathing."

Eddie took one of the chairs from the table, flipped it around, and sat on it backwards.

"So," the dentist said, and rubbed his hands together to dust off the crumbs, "what do you want with her?"

Eddie thought for a moment. There was no way he could tell this man that they were going to kill this woman to impress the Babe, to get him to owe them, to get him to need them. It all seemed so ridiculous now, brought on by booze and idle talk that went too far before sobriety and reality regained the upper hand.

The dentist took another bite of his sandwich. He wiped his mouth with small dabs of his napkin, then replaced it in his lap. "Look," he said, "I'm going to the game tonight. I'm not going to be here." He threw the last bit of sandwich into his mouth, crumpled up the deli paper, and drank the last inch of milk with one gulp. "Do what you have to."

And with that, he left.

Eddie was left sitting backwards, his hips beginning to cramp, wondering how this man could simply hand over a woman to him, a perfect stranger.

He still hadn't figured it out as he mounted the steps and came

upon Hay's bare backside, pumping away, his pants around his ankles, Helen seated in the sink, her thin, pockmarked legs thrown over Hay's shoulders, the tap digging into her back.

Eddie went back downstairs and sat in the darkened living room. In the dim light, the room came alive, the photos on the walls glinting with slivers of reflection, the furniture indistinct shapes, the items on the shelves all mystery and menace.

Some time later, a flushed Hay shook Eddie awake. He handed him a glass, which Eddie drank down before knowing what it contained — whiskey. Eddie made a sound halfway between a yawn and a cough as the liquor swam through his system.

Eddie followed Hay as he walked outside. The sun was sinking lower in the sky. Across the street, an elderly couple hacked at the ice on their sidewalk with the edge of their shovel. They waved. Eddie and Hay waved back. In their driveway the old folks had a brand-new Ford Model A. Hay stared at the car, and Eddie could see him thinking. Eddie wanted to run into the slushy road and wave his arms to chase everyone away, to warn them about what was going to happen.

But he didn't. Instead, he opened his coat and let Hay tuck a shotgun and some rope inside it. Eddie imagined Hay prompting him, prodding him to pull the trigger, and the small crack of the gun followed in seconds by the smell of gunpowder, the slight tingle of smoke in the air. Their flight would be sober of mood but not of mind, as they'd drink themselves into a stupor before they'd even reached Connecticut. It would only be then that Eddie would allow himself to ask Hay to pull over and he would pop the door open and fall out into the soft-falling snow, where he would retch and retch until it all came up.

Eddie kicked the snow from his shoes before he walked into the house, but Hay made no such concessions.

At first glance, Eddie thought Helen was dead already, but then her eyes lifted a touch under her heavy lids. Her forehead shone

with sweat and her whole body shook. Either she'd wrapped herself in towels or Hay had. Eddie figured she must have done it, thinking they'd been done with her, dragging herself onto her bed, where her dirty feet hung off the edge. Eddie had seen men in this state — struggling to find their way back to earth after the pills wore away — but never a woman.

“Now what?” Eddie asked.

Hay laughed and shook his head. “Now,” he said, “we kill her.” Hay primed his shotgun and leveled it at Helen's head. If she knew what was happening, she made no move to stop it, no attempt to plead for her life. Hay looked at Eddie out of the corner of his eye, but Eddie stared at the woman. Her hair, still wet from the bath, dripped down into her eyes and she blinked the water away. Hay, his face drawn, lowered the gun and handed it to Eddie.

Eddie didn't even bother to lift the weapon. Instead, he let the stock slide to the floor and leaned the gun against his thigh. His stomach settled. His shoulders dropped a full six inches as he relaxed.

“We're going to have to think of another way,” Hay said, and Eddie's insides began to churn again and his shoulders climbed back up towards his ears.

They found a root cellar. The doors had nearly rusted shut but gave way to one kick from Hay's boot.

They lit matches and cupped them in their hands as they walked around. Eddie pretended to be looking for something, instead he was walking, starting — much to his surprise — to pray. He prayed that he would be able to say no to Hay. He prayed that Hay would not, using the loaded gun in the crook of his elbow, shoot him in the back and leave him in this dank, musty cellar. He prayed that someone, anyone, would give him one reason not to kill Helen.

They reemerged in the icy world, Hay's arms full of supplies. Eddie marveled at the clouds his breath created.

Back in the bedroom, Eddie and Hay sweated with the heat of the house. Hay cut four lengths of two-minute fuses.

“Help me out,” Hay said, and tossed one of the fuses to Eddie. Hay—none too gentle—grabbed Helen’s wrist and lashed it to the bedpost. After a short pause, waiting for a sign to the contrary, Eddie followed Hay’s lead. Then they each bound an ankle. They spread gasoline over the room, over the sheets and the quilts and the curtains and the papers scattered on the roll-top desk. It dripped onto the floor and made rivers and pools. The vapors seethed in the room, causing the air to go liquid and the flowered wallpaper to shimmer and the glue to begin to give way, the sound of the adhesive letting go loud and low.

Last they threw the gasoline on Helen, and the sound of the liquid hitting flesh made them both pause. Then Hay emptied the last of the can on Helen’s body. He shook his box of matches and then pressed them into Eddie’s hand. “I ain’t about to kill someone I had relations with,” Hay said. He walked out of the room and down the hall.

Eddie moved closer to the bed. Everything was damp. The smell was unbearable. Eddie’s brain swam with the stench. The box of matches came from The French Rose, an upscale bar they’d followed the Babe to one night, listening to his stories and laughing at every turn, every foul word, every step. It’d cost them each a week’s salary, but how could they say it wasn’t worth it? Even though Eddie had always assumed Hay’d taken lives with the same cold reserve with which he’d removed an eye, he now understood neither one of them had murdered anyone. At least not to his knowledge. He’d left more than a few men in the gutter or down an alley without much sense to them, but he thought for sure he would’ve noticed the life leave them, some kind of noise or feeling, like the slight breeze on his neck after he’d had his hair trimmed.

The telephone wouldn’t be too far away—perhaps he could call the cops himself, and when the sirens began to bellow in the growing darkness, Hay and Eddie would make their escape back to New

York, back home.

"Please," Helen said. "Please do it."

Eddie jumped so that the matches fell from his hand into a small puddle of gasoline that had dripped from the edges of the comforter.

Helen's eyes were open and they searched for someone, the pupils dancing wildly in an effort to latch onto something. Eddie knelt down.

"I want you to do it," she said, and she began to cry. Eddie had never been so close to a crying woman before and he didn't know what to do. He placed one of his heavy hands on her wet shoulder. She shook free from his touch.

"Why would you want to die?" Eddie said.

"Why would you want to kill me?" she said. She coughed, the violence of the spasm prompting Eddie to lay his hand on her again. This time she let it rest.

They sat like that for some time. For a moment, Eddie imagined Hay outside, rolling and smoking cigarettes, blowing on his hands and stamping his feet to keep warm, waiting for the warm orange glow to overwhelm Helen's windows, occasionally glancing at the new T across the road. But mostly Eddie felt the slow rise and fall of Helen's chest, the way her body knew what to do, how to keep going, even if she didn't.

"Do it," Helen said again.

"I don't think I can," Eddie said.

The gasoline dripped from the walls, from the bedding, slick puddles gathering on the wood.

"It burns," Helen said, "it hurts. Please, please, do it."

Eddie said nothing, but he stood.

He struck a match on the box. He would stay. He would burn with her, with the room, with the house, with the tree that scratched at the window, begging to get into the warmth of a home. He didn't want to be here, either. Not anymore.

The match hit the ground and bounced once. It came to rest in a finger-wide river of gas that led to the curtains. The flames moved

with bright-blue heat, electric in their motion. The curtain dropped from the rod in a clump. The room began to smoke and writhe. The wallpaper, already drooping, caught quickly. The walls crept with fire.

The heat seared Eddie's face. He watched the world fall down around him.

Helen did not make a sound. But the acrid burnt smell of her flesh — or was it his own? — reached his nostrils.

But then a strange impulse hit him and he found himself tearing his burning shirt from his body, ramming his shoulder against the doorjamb as he did, finally getting free of the melting fabric, and tumbling down the stairs. He ran out into the yard with his undershirt smoking but intact. Hay sat in the car, which was running, the lights on and focused on the house.

Eddie thought Hay might be laughing, but instead clapped a hand on the shoulder Eddie had cracked against the side of the door. The pain brought stars to Eddie's eyes. He let the hand stay. He watched the stars, tried to follow them but couldn't. As they drove past, the missing shingles glowed bright against the darkness of the house, the flames licked orange tongues out from under windows, and the smell of gasoline filled the car from Eddie's shoes and pants and he shimmied out of them and rolled down the window and tossed them out in a bundle.

A few months later, they found Babe at a tavern not far from the Stadium. His bulk sat at the end of the bar, and they both moved for the stool next to him. Hay took the seat, but not without looking at Eddie first. Of all the things that had stayed the same, Hay lowering the gun and placing the matches in Eddie's hand had shifted the power somewhat. Hay called the shots — of that there was no doubt — but by his looks and his tone of voice, he suddenly cared if Eddie thought they were okay.

The big man's wide forehead creased and he leaned on his elbows, his great arms enveloping the space in front of him, the beer between

them almost lost. “Whaddya say, boys?” he asked, but with little of his usual charm.

Eddie ordered a beer and his hand shook as he took the glass from the bar and lifted it to his lips. Sometimes, at night, when he slid his feet into bed, he’d smell gasoline. He scrubbed his feet until they bled, raw, scratching wounds. One of his neighbors had come into the hallway bathroom and turned on the lights to find Eddie perched on the edge of the tub, his feet leaking red streaks towards the drain, his eyes full of tears. The man had mumbled that he’d use the bathroom on the floor above and brought his hand to the chain for the light. Eddie turned back to the tub and the light went out again.

The game had been called on account of the rain that threatened to drown out conversations with its incessant pounding, but Babe, Hay, and Eddie said scarcely a word to each other. He didn’t seem to recognize them at all. Once or twice, when prompted by Hay – “Tell us about Detroit, Babe” – Babe seemed to pull himself out of it for a second, and he’d start off one of his jazzy riffs. “Yeah, yeah. Did I ever tell you about the time Brick and I were in Detroit and . . .” He’d pause to take a sip of beer, lick his lips a couple of times, shake his head and hunch back over his glass.

Eddie avoided his reflection in the mirror behind the bar, but caught sight of himself in the copper series of taps in front of him, his face distended in the middle and stretched at the top. He replayed it over and over, triggered by a puddle or an oil slick on the road or the way a bed down the hall squeaked. Sometimes he cut the restraints and ran with her in his arms and out the door. Others, he grabbed hold of one of the bedposts and didn’t let go until it went black. Always, though, he felt the shame. It had only deepened when he returned to New York and things remained as they’d been. He and Hay, the same bars, the same scrapes, the same.

After only a couple of drinks, Babe stood to leave. He signaled to the bartender with a twirling finger that he was paying for the lot of them and threw a wad of money on the table, but he didn’t throw his

arms around them and rush them off to their next destination, where the beer was always colder, the music louder, and the women looser. Instead, he tucked his hat onto his head and bade them farewell.

Hay, whose face had gone red, clenched his jaw. “Hey, Babe,” he said, “shame about Helen.” Then he winked, a slow, deliberate wink. Eddie wanted his pulse to race, but it stubbornly refused to do anything.

“Yeah,” Base said, and touched his cap, as if he were going to take it off. Eddie could feel Hay relax, thinking the big man was going to sit down again. Then Babe touched his belly and then each of his shoulders in the Sign of the Cross. “Poor kid.” He shuffled towards the door in his familiar gait. “Poor kid.”

And Eddie sat back on his stool, shelled a peanut, and felt—as he would for the rest of his days—the heat on his face, the feeling of being on fire. ■