

## Hexagons by Robert Reed

My mother always made a lot of noise about keeping busy, and how much she hated tripping over kids who were doing nothing but reading books or watching the electric vase. That's why my brother and I belonged to the biggest, most important swim team in our little end of the world. It was to keep us fit and keep us from being underfoot. Chester was one of the stars on the team. I wasn't. Nobody ever explained how I got accepted into those lofty ranks. But if I know my mom, she told the coach, "Fair is fair. And if you want one of my boys, you've got to take both of them." Mom loved to talk about things like fair play and decency, but mostly, it was just awfully convenient having the two of us involved in the same sport. It meant less driving, and fewer events to attend. Which is a kind of fairness, I suppose—making life easy on your folks.

I wasn't an awful swimmer. In a flat-out race, Chester and I were pretty much equal. Pretty much. But my brother happened to be four years younger than me—four years and seven months, to be exact—which made him one of the top seven-year-olds in the province. And made me his big-assed sidekick. Our coach was pretty plain about his own affections. He'd stalk the sides of the bath, hollering instructions down at poor Chester. Elbows, legs, breathing, and then back to the elbows again. Swimming is a ferociously technical business. It demands a muscular grace that I've never been able to maintain. Occasionally the coach would check on me, making sure I wasn't dead in the deep end. But in general, my value with the team was more of a spiritual order: I made the other twelve-year-olds feel good about their abilities. Lapping me was a great game. Boys and girls could play that game all night. You can see why I didn't exactly adore the sport. But it wasn't that awful, either. I got to stare at girls wearing tight wet silks. That's always a benefit. And since nobody expected anything from me, I was free to cling to the side for minutes at a stretch, watching the girls and listening to the coach roaring at my brother. "Pull through the water! Through, Chester! Down the middle of your body. And bring your hand out this way. This way! With your elbow up . . . oh, Christ . . . what in hell is that. . . ?"

I don't remember that night's workout. And I don't have any special recollections of getting dressed in the locker room afterward. We always took showers, but I never got rid of the chlorine smell. The stuff clung to my hair, and if my goggles leaked—and they usually did—my eyes would burn for hours. Then we'd put our school uniforms back on again, and I always had to make sure that Chester remembered his silk trunks and goggles. I assume all those usual things happened that night. But what I do remember, without question, was that our father was supposed to pick us up. That gave the evening a dramatic kick. In our lives, Dad was something of a wild card. You could never guess where he was or what was so important, but his busy life had its way of dividing his allegiances, spreading him thin. I can't count the nights when it was Chester and me sitting on the steps of the Young Legionnaires' Club, waiting for that old green Testudo to pull up.

That night was different, however. The old man surprised us. Not only was he waiting at the locker door, he'd actually seen the last few minutes of the workout. "You looked strong out there," he told Chester, rubbing at his stubbly hair. Then to me, with a pushed-along concern, he asked, "Are you hurt? I saw you doing a lot of standing in the shallow end."

I could have lied. I could have told him, "Yeah, I had a cramp." I should have made up a great story, my twisting, pain-wracked body sinking to the bottom and half a dozen girls in wet silks fighting for the honor of pulling me up again. But instead, I just shrugged and told him, "No, I wasn't hurt."

"Then what were you doing?"

"Standing," I said. And I left it there.

Our father wasn't a big man, or small. There was a time in life when he seemed wondrously powerful—a titan capable of casting shadows and flinging snowballs clear over our house. But at the wise age of twelve, I was realizing that shadows were easy and our house wasn't all that big. And everything about my father was beginning to diminish. He had a fondness for overcoats that were too large for him. He was a smiling man. A salesman by trade and by temperament, he had a smiling voice and an easy charm and the sort of rough, unspectacular looks that helped people

believe whatever he was trying to sell them. We might have been rich, if Dad had just stuck to selling. But he had this dangerous streak of imagination. Every few years, he'd start up some new business. Each venture began with hope and considerable energy, and each lasted for a year or maybe eighteen months. At some point, we'd stop hearing about his new career. Dad would stay away from home, at least past dinnertime. Toward the end, he couldn't make it back until midnight, and I would lie in bed, wrestling with my brain, trying desperately to make myself sleep before Mom had the chance to corner him and the shouting began.

That night was a winter night. Windy and bitter. With Dad leading the charge, we stepped out into the cold dark air, our breath smoky and my wet hair starting to freeze. The old Testudo, big and square, was parked under a light. Hadrian was sitting in the back, in his straw, watching for us. I liked that cat, but he worried me. He liked to nip fingers. My fingers, mostly. All those generations of careful breeding and the fancy Asian splicing, but really, cheetahs are still as wild as they are tame. And while I thought it was neat to have a cheetah, Mom held a rather different opinion. "Do you know why your father bought him?" she asked me once. "Because he's going bald."

"The cat is?" I asked.

"No, your father is," she rumbled. Which, frankly, made no more sense to me than the cat going bald.

I climbed into the back seat, just so I could stick one of my least favorite fingers through the wire mesh, that dog-like face greeting me with a rough lick and a quick pinch of incisors. Chester was sitting up front with Dad. Dad cranked the motor, and it came on and then died again. He tried again, and there was a roar and cough and silence again. That was my father's life with machines. He decided the motor had flooded, and so he turned on the ceiling light and waited. He smiled back at me, or at his cat. I could never feel sure which of us was getting the smile. Then with an odd, important voice, he said, "I want to show you something."

I said, "Okay."

He reached inside his big overcoat, pulling out a folded-up newspaper. It was already turned to page two. One tiny article was circled. "Read it," he advised, handing the paper back to me. And even before I could start, he asked, "What do you think?"

I saw my father's name.

"Leonard Dunlop, 38, has filed as a candidate for Senate in District 8," I read. Then I held the article up to the weak light, eyes blinking from the chlorine, little tears giving every word a mushy, dreamy look. "If he wins," I read, "Mr. Dunlop intends to use his salary to help pay for his children's university education."

Again, Dad asked, "What do you think?"

"You're running for what?" I asked, using an unfortunate tone. A doubting tone.

"The Senate," he said, pointing proudly at the tiny article.

"The big one?" Chester asked. "In New Rome?"

I snorted. Twelve years old and not particularly wise in the ways of politics, but I still had enough sense to dismiss that possibility. "He means the little senate. For our province, that's all."

Which wasn't the best way to phrase things.

Dad gave me a look. Then he turned forward and started the car, listening to the ugly engine cough and die. Then he turned to Chester, telling him, "But this is just the beginning."

With his salesman's voice, he sounded convinced, saying, "This is an important district. If we win, it's a launching pad to New Rome. And from there, who knows? Who knows?"

My father's sense of politics was always shaky. For instance, he might have been smart to warn Mom about his impending candidacy. Instead, he never quite mentioned his plans to her, and she had to learn about it when friends and relatives began calling. Or maybe on second thought, Dad had a good, clear sense of politics. Because if he had said something, I think Mom would have told him half a thousand reasons why it was the wrong thing to do, and stupid; and against his better judgment, he might have listened to her wise counsel.

As it was, Mom pretty much amazed me. She was waiting for us at the dinner table, and she was furious. But she didn't do anything worse than give Dad a good hard glare. Then she sat her boys down and said, "I think your father would make a good senator. If he happens to win."

There. That's why she wasn't screaming. Mom had a good rational sense about the world, and she knew the old man didn't have a chance.

I don't remember much else about that night. We watched the electric vase, waiting for the late news. We waited to hear Dad's name. But with all the national stuff to talk about, and the international stuff, and a report from the Mars mission, plus the weather and sports, there wasn't a lot of room left for local news. I went to bed wondering if he really was running. Or was his candidacy just a bunch of misprints in a newspaper famous for its mistakes?

But Dad was running, and it didn't stay secret. Friends and classmates heard about it from their parents. My best friend knew even before I did. Nathan was this part-Jewish kid, sharp and smart in all sorts of ways. He was older than me by a few months, but it felt like years. He always knew stuff that I never even thought about knowing. We rode the same bus to school, and since his house was a couple of stops before mine, he was usually waiting for me. That next morning, wearing a big grin, he said, "I heard about your dad."

"What'd you hear?" I blurted, suddenly alarmed. I always had a what's-he-done-now feeling about my father.

"He's running for the provincial senate," Nathan told me.

"Oh, yeah."

"He entered just before the deadline," he told me.

I had no idea there were deadlines. But then again, life seemed a lot like school, and school was nothing but a string of deadlines.

"You know who he's running against?" Nathan asked.

I said, "Maybe."

"You don't."

"Maybe not," I agreed.

He named four names. Today, only one of those names matters. But I doubt if I learned any of them that morning. Nathan could have been speaking Mandarin, for all I cared.

"They're running against your father," he explained. "In the primary, this spring. Then the two candidates who earn the most votes--"

"I know how it works," I complained.

"Run against each other," he finished. "Next autumn."

That was nearly a year off. Nothing that remote could matter, and so I told Nathan, "He's going to win."

"Who is? Your father?"

I said, "Sure," with a faltering conviction.

Nathan didn't make fun of me. I expected teasing, and I probably deserved it. But he just looked down the length of the bus, nodding to himself. "That wouldn't be the worst thing," he muttered. "Not by a long ways."

I liked Nathan for reasons other than Nathan. He lived up on the hill, in a genuinely enormous house, and because his family was wealthy, he always had fancier toys and every good game. His mother was beautiful and Jewish, which made her doubly exotic to me. His father was a government man in one of those big bureaus that helped protect our nation's industries, which made him important. But Nathan's grandfather was my favorite. The old man had emigrated from Britain, escaping some ill-defined trouble, and now he lived with his son's family, tucked away in their guest quarters. He was a fat man, a cigar smoker and a determined drinker, who'd sit and talk to me. We had actual conversations about real, adult topics. The man had this massive intelligence and endless opinions, and with a booming voice, he could speak forever about things that I never knew were important. And where Nathan would ridicule my ideas, his grandfather seemed to accept much of what I said, correcting me where I was horribly wrong, and congratulating me on my occasional and rather tiny insights.

"What you should do," Nathan once told me. "Ask to see his war game."

I'd been coming to the house for a year or two, but the game had never been mentioned.

"It's kind of a secret. But I think he'll show it to you. If you ask nice, and if you pick the right time."

"What's the right time?" I asked.

"After he's drunk too much," my friend confided, winking with a conspiratorial glee.

Looking back, I can see exactly what Nathan wanted. He wanted the excuse to see the secret game for himself. But regardless of reasons, I was curious. A few weeks later, when his grandfather seemed properly stewed, I mentioned the mysterious game. The old man stared at me for a minute, smiling in that thin way people use when they're trying not to look too pleased. Then with a low, rumbling voice, he asked, "And what, dear boy, have you heard about this game?"

"It's about the world, and war," I answered. Then I lied, saying, "That's all I know."

We were sitting in the enormous dining room. The old man planted a half-finished cigar into his buttery face, and with a calm deep voice, he said to Nathan, "Take your good friend upstairs. When I am ready, I will sound the horns of war."

We obeyed, sitting anxiously on Nathan's bedroom floor. His teenaged sister was upstairs, too. Wearing nothing but a white slip, she was jumping from her room to the bathroom and back again. I don't need to mention, there was another benefit in Nathan's friendship. I was watching for his sister, and he told me, "This'll be fun." Then his grandfather hollered, and we had to go downstairs again.

The game board had been brought out of its hiding place. With a glance, I knew why it was such a secret. All the words were Mandarin. The board looked new and modern, filled with a cold, slick light. With the drapes closed, the dining room was lit up by the game. Someone had spliced extra chips into the mechanical brain.

With a touch of the keypad, the old man changed the Mandarin into New Latin, and a huge map of the world emerged on a background of neat black hexagons.

"Technically," he said, "this is an illegal possession."

I knew that already.

"It came from China, and it was smuggled through the Aztec Republic. A friend of a friend did this, for a fee."

I nodded, feeling nothing but impressed.

"In the Old Empire," he explained, "a toy such as this would be labeled ideologically dangerous. In the New Lands, thankfully, we are a little less obsessed about maintaining the fabled status quo. But still, our government would be within its rights to take this from me, if only to harvest the mechanical mind. This is not a new game, but its circuits are still superior to anything we can build today."

He didn't have to tell me.

"Sit," he suggested.

I plopped into a hard chair.

"Who do you wish to be?" he asked.

Boundaries had appeared on the map. This wasn't our world, I realized. It was the past. Instead of the New Lands, there was an empty continent floating in a silvery mist. The enormity of Asia lay before me. At the far end was the Roman Empire, its territories marked with a sickly gray, while the Chinese Empire was under my hands, its green lands dotted with cities and roads and tiny military units existing as images floating inside that wondrous game board.

"You may become any civilization," the old man explained. "Your responsibility is to control the nation, or nations, that comprise your civilization."

"Be Rome," Nathan blurted. "Or India. Or Persia. Or Mongolia."

I said, "China."

A fresh cigar was lit, and a fresh whiskey was poured. And the old man grinned at me, his smooth and pale and very fat flesh shining in the game's light. There was a deep, scorching wisdom in his eyes. And with a voice holding ironies that I couldn't hear, he asked, "How did I know?"

He said, "Naturally. You wish to pick the winner."

Once the senate campaign began, we started attending church regularly.

I was pretty much of one mind about those Sunday mornings. I hated every part of them. I'd outgrown my one good suit months ago, and I could never tie the fake-silk tie properly, and the stiff leather shoes made my toes cross and ache. I hated how my complaints about my wardrobe were met with stony silence. I despised the boredom of sitting in church while strangers sang and prayed and sat silent, listening while the elderly priests gave us God's lofty opinions about the state of the world. Sometimes, in secret, I didn't mind hearing the choir singing. I also appreciated the teenage girls swishing along in their best dresses. And when I wanted, I could open the Bible and hunt for bloody passages. Not even Mom could complain about that, sitting stiff and tired beside me, smiling for the world to see.

We belonged to the Celtic Reformed Church. I didn't appreciate it then, but our little branch of God's Word had some very wealthy believers. Our church was a new and expensive building, larger than necessary and just a little short of beautiful. Donations helped pay the tariffs and bribes required to import exotic lumber and foreign stone. Even the lights were a little spectacular-floating Japanese-made orbs that moved according to invisible commands, their shapes changing to light up the entire room, or to focus on a very specific, very important spot.

During the sermons, every light shone on the pulpit. One special morning, our bishop came to deliver the sermon, and he spoke forever about poverty and its beauty in God's eye. He explained how Christendom was special in every important way. God had blessed our faith and the Empire. How else could we have survived to this day, against titanic odds? True, we might not possess the wealth of some nations. And we didn't have spaceships or cities riding on the waves. And perhaps our science seemed backward to some observers. But what did science matter? Where was the value in flying to Mars? Nonbelievers could never enter heaven, and wasn't Heaven the only worthwhile destination in this brief, brief life of ours?

Our bishop was a very old man, and at the end of the service, when he walked past me, I heard his Indian-built heart beating like a hammer somewhere down in his belly. I thought that was odd.

Later, while riding home, I described my thoughts. "If Heaven's so important," I asked, "why did the bishop buy that fancy heart? Why didn't he just let himself die?"

We were using Mom's little car. I was sitting in back, with Chester, and the adults were up front, not making so much as a squeak.

They didn't understand me, I assumed. With a stubborn tone, I continued explaining my concerns. "And if science isn't that important, why do we need fancy lights? Or cars? Or electric vases?"

My father didn't answer. But he halfway shrugged his shoulders, as if admitting the silliness of it.

Mom took a different course. She turned and stared at me, and after an icy week or two, she reminded me, "When you're in public, like today, people are watching. I want you to remember that. People are judging you and all of us. Do you know what I'm saying, Samuel?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"The world is more complicated than you can imagine," she warned. "And it's usually best to keep your opinions to yourself."

But if I couldn't imagine the world, who could?

That cold question gnawed at me. Watching the backs of my parents' heads, it occurred to me that neither of them had any special imagination, and worse than that, they were happy with their stupidity.

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I picked China, and lost.

The game was set at novice level. Its rules and the mechanical mind were made simple, and I had more people and money and better armies and the finest navy in the world. And I lost. India invaded, and Japan invaded, and Nathan laughed at me, watching my collapse accelerate with the centuries. His grandfather was more patient, reminding both of us, "This is a simulation, and a decidedly crude one, at that. Even if you began again, and even if you made the same initial moves, events would play out in some very different fashion." Then he said the word, "Chaos," with a genuine fondness. "Chaos can break the strongest nation, and it can build empires from the weakest tribe."

I had no idea what he was telling me.

Nathan pretended to understand. "Let me play," he begged. He had been waiting most of an hour to make that request. "At level three? Okay, Grandpa? And I'll be the Roman Empire."

At level three, there were more rules and more circumstances to watch, and the other powers were smarter by a long ways. At first, it looked as if my friend was failing badly. He let the Great Wall of Constantine fall to ruins. He allowed invaders from the steppes to descend while civil wars spread through the Empire, a dozen little nations blossoming in the mayhem. Then for no sensible reason, he turned those new countries against each other. I thought he was crazy. I confidently laughed at him. But even while his little nations fought pointless, nearly endless wars, Nathan appeared serene. Even when the plagues erupted, he wore a big smug know-it-all smile.

Meanwhile, China was invaded. The Mongols came and took everything, and then after a long while, they were absorbed. When new Chinese leaders appeared, they decided they didn't need the rest of the world. The great ocean-going junks were allowed to sink, and the ancient trade routes vanished under desert sands. As the centuries passed, little changed in that piece of the world. It was as if some great spell had been cast over its people and the emerald lands.

The Roman Empire remained splintered and angry. But each new nation built its own navy, and with armies conditioned by war and disease, each spread across the world, conquering every wild continent before pushing into India, and then, invading the suddenly backward China.

Elbows on the table, I watched a very strange world emerge.

"This is a simulation," the old man said one last time. Then he set down an empty glass, telling me, "But if one were to set the game to the most difficult level, and if each side competed equally well . . . well, the game never ends the same way twice. But there are patterns. Lessons, you might call them. One time out of five, the Christian states come to dominate the world."

I looked at the date.

1933, by the Christian count.

This was our year, and nothing was familiar. There were no spaceships, much less cities on the moon. China was mangled and poor, and India belonged to an independent Britain, and again, with a sick surety, war was breaking out in the remnants of the Empire. The Germans were marching into Gaul, and the Slavs were massing their millions, and in the New Lands, a new Roman republic was building armies and fleets, and crude propeller planes were waiting to carry the first uranium bombs.

As a family, for the sake of the campaign, we went to bake sales. We witnessed the start of running races and tulip festivals and cock fights. We attended the grand opening of a fancy food market, and I ate enough cookies to throw up. Dressed in our finest, we stood bunched together in big rooms and small rooms, smiling with a trained enthusiasm. I remember a strange man patting my brother on the shoulders, saying, "Here's the swimmer, hey? What a little steamboat!"

Jerk, I thought. Smiling still.

Then he gave me a distracted handshake, asking my little brother, "So what do you think? Another month till the primary, and it's down to a three-horse race."

Having just turned eight, my brother could ask, "What are you talking about?"

The stranger laughed, winking at our father. "Leonard? Didn't you tell your boys?"

When my father lied, he would smile. He was smiling like a lighthouse just then, saying, "I guess I hadn't gotten around to it."

"Two of your pop's opponents are done. Finished." The stranger didn't realize that we hadn't heard the gossip. "And as it happens, it's the two front-runners that are gone. One quit for health reasons. He says. And the other . . . well, let's just say there's some dirt. Something about young girls. And if he doesn't pull out of the race, he's going to look like an absolute idiot." Again, he patted my brother on the shoulders. "So yeah, boys. A three-horse race now. Anybody's race!"

Dad made the nightly news, if only in little doses. His name was mentioned in passing, or a baby-faced reporter would speak to him for five or six seconds. From the EV, I learned that my father was concerned about values in the youth. Which meant me, I realized. I learned that he wanted to protect our markets and our good Roman traditions, and he never quite mentioned that his Roman-built Testudo was a piece of crap. But more than anything, the reporters wanted to know about our pet cheetah. They wanted pictures of Hadrian. Everybody got a real kick out of seeing my dad scratching at the cat's little ears, ready to pull back his hand at the first sign of trouble.

At school, I enjoyed a minor celebrity. Girls would ask me if I was Samuel Dunlop, and when they giggled in front of me, I didn't feel hurt. I felt special enough to hold my ground, and maybe once or twice, I kept the girls giggling. Of course the guys weren't nearly as impressed. But there were moments when I could see even the bullies making new calculations. What if my father won the race? Senators had power, they had been told. How much power would I wield, just by being his son? I watched them as they weighed these important political considerations, and then in the next instant, surrendering to a fatalistic whim, they would shrug their shoulders and give me a good hard smack.

Beating up an important person was just too much of a lure.

How much more celebrity could I tolerate? I asked myself. Lying on the ground, hands pressed

against my aching belly.

As a family, we attended a picnic.

It must have been some company's big spring picnic, although really, I don't have any clear memory of why hundreds of people had gathered in the park. They were just there, and of course we showed up. And of course we wore better clothes than anybody had ever worn to a chicken-eating event. Mom told us to behave, as always, but this time there were new warnings. The local news was going to be there with EV cameras, which made the audience potentially enormous, and important, and if we were anything but saints, the world was going to crumble to dust.

There was an army of kids at the picnic, and I didn't know any of them. But they had a bashball, and a game broke out, and one of us asked permission to play. Probably Chester, since there was a better chance of a "Yes" when he asked those kinds of questions. I found myself in the trenches, playing against a genuinely huge girl. Fat, and strong like every fat girl, and maybe a head taller than me. On the first play, she mowed me down. On the next play, she used a thick arm and flung me on my ass. But the worst whipping came from our team general. Staring at me with an easy contempt, he asked, "Are you going to let that bitch win?"

No. I decided to make a heroic stand, and with a virtuous rage, I reclaimed my place on the line and threw a shoulder into my opponent. My swimmer's muscles delivered a good hard blow. The girl stopped in mid-stride. But the jarring awakened her own pride and rage, and again, with the game flowing around us, she set her feet and drove at me. In memory, that next collision was crushing, and epic, ineffectual and extremely painful; and again, we stepped back and gathered our strength before charging. In all, we collided maybe a dozen times. But it felt like a thousand impacts. The girl began to sweat and gasp for breath. The rest of the world grew still and quiet. I realized eventually that the game had paused, boys and a few girls standing in a circle, watching the spectacle. We would step back, and charge. Back, and charge. And in the end, I won. I held up to the girl's worst blows, and she finally turned and stumbled away, crying. My victory was a sweet thing for all of two minutes. Then my mother found me. She found me and grabbed me by my half-dislocated shoulder, and with a low fury, she explained what it means to be embarrassed, to watch the daughter of an important somebody weeping uncontrollably, talking about the wicked awful monster boy who had just beaten her up.

My punishment began by sitting still and being quiet.

Three of the candidates were giving speeches. The man who liked young girls was still officially in the race, but he had the good sense not to show up. About that first candidate, I remember nothing. Nothing. I was sitting on a plastic folding chair. I was glowering at my scuffed shoes and my fists, my shoulder aching while my frail pride tried to heal itself. A hard stretch of applause made me lift my eyes. The first speaker was leaving now, and my father was slowly climbing up onto the little stage, smiling at us with a remarkable shyness.

I had never seen my father so nervous. In his natural environment—inside a little office or a smoky tavern—he was a marvel. He could talk to anyone, and for hours, charming them with an artful ease. But here were hundreds of people, and cameras, and reporters wearing skeptical expressions. He was nervous, making little jokes that didn't cause anybody to laugh. Then he began to talk about what he wanted to do as a senator. He wanted to work hard. He wanted to be their friend in the provincial capital of New Carthage. He wanted the roads patched. (My father's voice gained a genuine life at that point. He had a visceral hatred for the potholes that kept knocking our wheels out of alignment.) And again, for emphasis, he reminded everybody that he wanted to work hard for them, and to be their very good friend.

If there was any big applause, I don't remember it.

I remember Mom pissing me off. I was ready to clap, but she had to give me a warning nudge anyway. As if I'd forget to clap for my father. But neither of us applauded for long, and we remained seated, and during that next little silence, the last candidate came forward.

He wasn't a big man. He had black hair and blue eyes that I could see from five rows back. For some reason, he wore a uniform. Or maybe his clothes were cut so they would resemble a uniform. With a practiced ease, he took his place in front of the microphone, a look of absolute focus



coming into his milky white face. I remember that moment. I remember staring at him, waiting for whatever word dropped out of his mouth first. His little moustache twitched, and his lips parted, and with an accented voice, he said, "We are a great people, and a noble people. But we are surrounded by enemies. Yellow enemies. Brown enemies. Red ones, and black. Even within our own ranks, we have traitors who are working against us, trying to undermine the great things that are our duty, and our destiny.

"The white Christian people of the world deserve this world!

"For too long, we have let ourselves remain weak, and poor. But if we can find the will, joining our hands in the common good . . . if we finally assume the mantle of greatness . . . then the world will be ours, and the stars. . . !"

In essence, that was his speech.

I can't remember the exact words, but I'm sure he didn't waste any breath talking about potholes. And he never explained how a local senator—a junior officer in a New Lands province—could bring the smallest change to the enormous world. But when the candidate finished, screaming at the microphone one last time, the applause was instantaneous, and furious, and I felt myself being carried along. A reborn Rome! And all of our enemies defeated! What could be more wonderful? I was thinking. Then a hand clamped down on my hands, keeping them from applauding anymore.

It was my mother's hand.

"I was being polite," I lied.

"Don't be," was her advice. "This one time, Samuel . . . you really don't want to be polite. . . ."

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Putting words inside quotation marks is a lie, by the way. When I tell this story, I have no real memory about what words people used. That's the way it is with most people, I'm sure. What I remember are feelings—my twelve, nearly thirteen-year-old feelings—and sloppy little pieces of certain moments that felt important at the time. Inside this entire story, I don't think there are more than two or three moments when I'm perfectly sure what words were spoken.

The day after the picnic was a school day.

Like always, I sat with Nathan on the bus. I mentioned the picnic and baseball and my father speaking, and Nathan asked how the speech went, and I lied. "Fine," I claimed. And then I talked for a full mile about the little candidate with the blue eyes. "Wouldn't it be wonderful?" I asked. "Rome strong again. The Chinese and Indians not telling us what to do. All of our enemies sent packing, the bastards. Then we could build anything we wanted, and spaceships. Just think, Nathan! You and me could fly off to Jupiter, or someplace. . . !"

My best friend looked at me, saying nothing.

Then we pulled up in front of school, and I didn't see him again until gym class. He was dressing, and I was dressing at the other end of the aisle, and a couple of guys came up beside him. They were classmates of ours, but for the usual reasons, they were older by a year. Older, and bigger. Carrying themselves with a practiced menace, they did nothing but poke my friend in the ribs, and laugh. I stood at a safe distance, watching. The biggest kid said "Jew," at least twice. And then Nathan handed money to the other kid. And when they were gone, he turned away from me and finished dressing.

I don't remember him talking to me during gym class.

Or on the bus ride home, either.

When I stood for my stop, Nathan stood.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

He said, "Nothing."

The driver opened the back door, and together, we jumped to the curb. Then the bus pulled away, the dirty Roman engine leaving the air swirling with fumes and soot. And again, I asked my best friend, "What are you doing?"

"Wait," he told me.

"For what?"

"Just wait."

So we stood there. The bus left, and the cars following after the bus started to climb the long hill. Then again, I began to ask what we were waiting for, and as soon as my mouth was open, he hit me.

I fell down.

And he kicked me. Not once, and not softly. A day's worth of being furious went into those kicks, and then he kneeled over me, saying, "Asshole."

I've always remembered that one word.

"Do you know who the enemies are?" Nathan asked me. "The traitors, I mean. The ones Mr. Blue-Eyes was talking about. Do you know who?"

He said, "It's the Jews."

I didn't believe him.

"It's me, Samuel!"

And then I did something supremely stupid. With a gasp, I reminded him, "But you're only half-Jewish."

Again, he kicked me. Then he shook his head, watching me writhe in misery. I remember his face—the glowering, betrayed look that he was throwing at me—and I remember his eyes—how they were squinting and tearing up, looking miserable and very much scared.

Sometimes I ran errands with my father, helping the campaign.

Mostly, I remember being bored. Sometimes there were meetings with backers or people who might want to become backers. Sometimes the work involved putting up signs in yards and carrying packets of flyers around strange neighborhoods. Half of our basement was filled with signs and flyers and metal buttons that read Vote Dunlop. I began to appreciate that running for political office was an expensive chore. And we weren't spending nearly as much as the blue-eyed candidate. Every night, without fail, we saw him at least two or three times on the EV. Even when Dad turned the channel, he couldn't escape those commercials—slick, professional, full of music and cheering crowds.

Our basic flyer was a rectangle of stiff paper. Dad's photograph was five years old, taken when he still had his hair. My name was on the flyer, and Chester's, and our ages. There was a long list of Dad's accomplishments, and that was the first time that I can remember hearing anything about his militia service. Every young man had to be in the militia, and so that didn't surprise me. But the flyer told me that my own dad had earned some kind of special award for his service.

"What's a Red-tail?" I asked.

We were riding down an anonymous street. Dad was looking straight ahead, and I was sitting beside him. The back seat was filled with flyers and yard signs and boxes full of rattling buttons. Hadrian was busy napping in the old straw.

"It's a hawk," Dad began. "A big one. We've got them around here—"

"The Red-tail Ribbon," I interrupted. "You won it."

"It's nothing," he said.

Which didn't make sense. But before I could say as much, he told me, "It's a militia thing. If you serve on the frontier, and you see combat--"

"You did?" I blurted.

He didn't answer.

"You actually fought?" I asked. Then I rapidly reviewed what little I could remember about old border skirmishes. "Who'd you fight? The Mandan? The Lakota?" And then with an evil delight, I asked, "Was it the Aztecs?"

The Aztecs were a real nation. The other tribes were just patches of color on the map, each sponsored by a different Asian power.

"Was it?" I pressed.

It must have been an enormous temptation for my father. His son was desperate to find some excuse to worship him, and it would have been worship. I would have believed anything that painted my father as being a soldier of consequence. But he resisted that easy deification. With a shrug of his shoulders, he admitted, "People were trying to cross our border, and my unit lobbed shells in front of them."

"Were they enemy soldiers?" I hoped.

"No," he confessed. "No, they were just . . . just some people trying to slip across. . . ."

"And you shot in front of them?"

"Mostly," he said. Then with a suddenly angry voice, he said, "And now we're not talking about this anymore."

Nathan's grandfather filled the front door. One of his soft round hands was resting on the doorknob, while the other clung to a thick glass filled with some deliciously colored liquor. With an odd smile, he stared down at me. "We haven't seen you for a little while, Samuel." Then a sturdy, engaging laugh erupted, and he smiled at my father. "Mr. Dunlop. It is my deepest pleasure, sir. Please, please. Come inside."

Except for the old man, the house seemed empty. He led us into the darkened dining room. "Sit, my friends. If you wish."

Dad glanced at the game board.

"Cigar? Or a drink, perhaps?"

"No, thank you."

"Sit. Please, sirs. You are my guests here."

We settled into two hard chairs. Then with a quiet voice, my father allowed, "This is quite a map."

"Did your son mention this toy? No? Well, good!" The old man chuckled, winking at me. "It is, I suppose, a bit of a secret. Rather illegal, and there's no reason to broadcast its existence to the world." Then he launched into a crisp, thorough explanation of the game. "Samuel played one scenario, and he witnessed a few potential outcomes. This is a very different scenario. This is our world as it stands today . . . reduced, or enlarged, into a set of contesting algorithms and modeled personalities. . . ."

A thick finger touched a control.

The map evaporated, leaving a white background covered with neat black hexagons.

"I won't waste your time, Mr. Dunlop. Suffice to say I could run this scenario thousands of times, and to the satisfaction of every bloodless mathematician and chilled intellect, I could prove that certain policies, and certain leaders, would be dangerous to us. To the Old Empire, to the New Lands, and naturally, to your good sons."

Father nodded as if he understood, and smiled.

"Politics," said the old man.

He said, "I must tell you, sir. It's a very brave thing to be a political animal in these times."

Hearing a compliment, Father squared his shoulders.

"I once belonged to that noble profession," he continued. "Perhaps you are unaware, but I delved into my native island's politics, on more than one occasion. Which is, I should add, one of the compelling reasons why I came to these safer shores. I spoke my mind. I argued for my causes. But I have a tremendous amount of skin, as I'm sure you've noticed, sir, and I rather want that skin to remain safe. At least for the present moment."

I shivered.

My father cleared his throat. "When we talked on the phone . . . you mentioned helping my candidacy--"

"Indeed. I very much would like that, yes."

"How?"

The old man smiled and puffed on his cigar, saying nothing.

"Money?" asked Dad.

"I could. I could be most generous. But to be frank, it's too late for money. No sum, no matter how extravagant, can insure his defeat in the coming election."

Who was he talking about?

The old man lowered his cigar, blowing out a long cloud of smelly smoke. "Make no mistake: He is a bastard. A serpent. A charmer, and a teetotaler, and the worst kind of dreamer. What he believes is reprehensible, and sadly, his hatreds are quite ordinary. What motivates him is an intoxicating sense of supreme destiny. Are you aware, Mr. Dunlop? Your opponent was involved in a failed attempt to spark a civil war. His hope was to unite the Germanic provinces against Rome, and then conquer the Old Empire, and from there, he would have launched a suicidal assault against the Far East."

Finally, I realized who the he was.

"Unfortunately, his rebellion was little more than a joke. Young men pretending to be a mighty force, and they were crushed in a day. If our mutual enemy had done any real harm, he would have been executed; but instead of death, he received a simple prison sentence. Incarceration is always dangerous; the monster had time to think. To organize, and plan. He wrote a small book—a brutal little treatise on hatred and rampant nationalism. I own three copies myself. I wish I had a million copies, and I could make every voter read it from cover to cover. But I don't, and I can't. What I can do is give you one copy. The man's own words should erase any doubts you hold about his madness."

Dad stared at the plain of empty hexagons. Then his eyes lifted, and with a weary voice, he said, "All right. I need help, but it's not going to be money. So how am I supposed to beat this bastard?"

The old man grinned and sipped at his drink. "Samuel tells me that you are an exceptional

salesman."

Dad glanced at me, a little surprised.

Warily pleased.

"I want you to use your considerable skills, sir." Leaning across the table, hands laid flat on the game board, Nathan's grandfather said, "With my help, I want you to help me, sir. Help me peel the uniform off that very ugly serpent."

The campaign office filled what used to be a drinking tavern. Dad found that funny. He tried to laugh as he parked, and he kept hold of his smile even when he had stopped laughing. A man stepped out of the office, blinking in the sunshine. Two other men followed after him. Dad opened his door and stepped out, and the first man said, "If you would, sir. Lift your arms."

The other men held electric wands. The wands hummed as they passed across my father's body, and then the first man said, "Open your coat, Mr. Dunlop. Please."

"Does everybody get this honor?" Dad inquired.

"Your coat, sir. Now."

He complied, glancing over at me.

"Would the boy like to come inside, too?"

Dad said, "No."

The first man smiled and looked at me. "I think he would. Wouldn't you, son?"

I looked at my father, then back at Hadrian.

"Your pet will be fine here," the man said. He was fat and jolly-looking, and when I stepped down next to him, I caught a whiff of what almost seemed to be perfume. "Like your father, lift your arms."

I listened to the humming.

"He's expecting you," the man reported. "Don't keep him waiting."

We walked into a barely lit room, long and nearly empty. The blue-eyed candidate sat in the back, behind a massive desk that was far fancier than anything else in the place. He didn't stand. He barely looked up, writing on a fancy Chinese tablet. I thought that was very strange. The man hated the yellow horde, yet he used their machinery. To a twelve year-old boy, nothing smells worse than the tiniest whiff of hypocrisy, and it was all I could do not to turn up my nose.

The blue eyes stared at us.

A stern voice said, "Mr. Pothole. Have a seat." Then the eyes looked past us, and with his German-Latin, he said, "I am quite busy. Quite busy. What is this business you wished to discuss with me?"

My father sat, and I sat on the only other chair.

"I'm going to lose," Dad began. "That's pretty much guaranteed. I can't beat you in the primary, or that other guy."

I stared at the blue eyes. Nothing else mattered.

"I just wanted you to know. After the primary, when I end up third, I'll throw my support to you. I'll work for your election. Anything that can help, I'll do it. That's what I wanted to tell you."

There was a brief, cold silence.

Then the candidate asked, "Why me? Don't you approve of the other man's politics?"

"God, no!" exclaimed Dad.

Then his head dropped. In the corner of an eye, I could see my father wiping at his bald scalp. I would have loved to see his expression. The anger, the misery. But I had to keep my eyes straight ahead, blinking as infrequently as possible.

"What do you believe, Mr. Dunlop?"

For a long moment, my father held his tongue. And with a calculated rage and the absolute perfect tone, he said exactly three words.

"Fucking kike lover!"

I remember that moment perfectly. The moment, the practiced words, and that feeling of standing on some great hilltop, any little motion destined to send everything falling in one of a million separate directions.

The blue eyes closed slowly, and opened again, and the pen was set aside. "Don't worry about our mutual opponent," the candidate purred. "He is an adulterer. He sleeps with his secretary. A man like that isn't fit for public office, and I think in a few days, the world will find out what kind of man he is."

"Really?" Dad gasped. "God, that would be great!"

"So you see, we are destined to survive the primary. You and me. One of us will be the senator. And perhaps the other one, if he is willing, could play a little role in the new senator's organization."

With a seamless ease, Dad said, "Could I?"

The candidate was amused, more than anything. He smiled and glanced at me, and taking courage from my unblinking stare, he said, "Mr. Dunlop. I understand that you're some kind of war hero. Please, if you have a moment, tell me all about yourself."

The candidate was supposed to be very busy, yet he had time to chat with my father for the next hour-plus. For a while, he would ask little questions, and Dad would tell a somewhat altered version of his life story. Yes, he was a decorated veteran. He had fought the red scourge on the frontier. But everything since had been a string of disappointments and outright failures. More than once, he blamed the Jews for undercutting his new businesses. What could be done? He wanted to know. How could the world be made fair and right for all the white Christians?

Gradually, the candidate began to talk. More often, and for longer stretches of time, he would answer my father's leading questions. Then an hour and a half had passed, and the blue eyes were burning, and the man had stood up, holding court from behind his big desk, pounding on the top of it with a fury that left me terrified, and weak.

It was the fleshy, perfumed man who stopped the terrible show. He shuffled up to the candidate, whispered a few words and laughed in a jolly fashion.

"Of course," the candidate said. Then to us, he explained, "I have an appearance. We'll have to resume this talk at another time." He shook both our hands. I remember a clammy heat and a strong grip, and he stared into my eyes, absolutely unaware that a fleet of very tiny, very modern electronics were floating on my tears, transporting every sight and sound to a relay device set up in a nearby warehouse. In a few hours, an edited version of the candidate's raging, curse-strewn tirade would end up on the nightly news, and all but the most hateful voters would turn away from him.

But that was still in the future.

With his new allies following after him, the candidate walked out into the afternoon sun. "Thank you, Mr. Dunlop. We will be in touch."

Dad started to fish for his keys.

"That cheetah," said the candidate. "I've heard about it. Let me look at him, for a minute."

Dad didn't want to. But he had no choice. He lowered the back window a little ways, and Hadrian poked his head through the gap. The candidate stood at a respectful distance. He grinned and said, "What a noble, proud beast." Then he turned to me, winking. "You're a very lucky lad, having a pet such as this."

I said, "I know."

Later, when Nathan and I were friends again, I'd tell him that part of the story over and over again.

It was his favorite part.

"I know," I said.

"A lucky lad," the candidate repeated.

Inspiration struck me. All of a sudden, I said, "Pet him." I smiled and said, "Really, he loves being petted behind the ears."

"Does he?" the candidate asked, a little tentative now.

"Oh, sure. Go on!"

Dad didn't say a single word.

The pale clammy hand started to reach for the ears, and the cat watched the fingers, eyes smiling . . . and then came the sharp click of incisors slicing into living flesh.

There were always swim meets in the summer. One of the meets was in New Carthage, at the big pool in the main city park. We left before dawn, taking Mom's car so we were sure to make it. My brother had a string of races, and I think he won most of them. I had a couple, and I don't remember where I finished. I don't care now, and I barely cared then.

What I remember is a huge tent that one of the teams had set up on the grass.

What I remember, always, is stepping into the odd orange light that filtered through the phony silk, the heat of the day diminishing while the air grew damp and close. A hundred or more bodies were sitting and standing inside that tiny space, and everybody was trying to hold their breath. A portable EV was set on a cooler. With a special antenna, it was picking up the feed from a Chinese satellite. While I watched, stunned and thrilled, a round hatch pulled open on another world, and a man in a padded suit climbed down a long ladder, jumping down onto the dusty red surface that had never before known the touch of a human being.

Everybody cheered.

I remember that wild, honest roar coming up from everywhere. Including from me.

Sometime later that day, just by chance, I was standing near the main gate of the pool. A familiar man came walking past me. I looked at him, and he said, "Samuel," with this easy, friendly voice that I halfway recognized. But it took me several moments to place both the face and voice. By then, he was introducing himself. He shook my hand, and I asked, "What are you doing here?"

Chuckling, he said, "I'm a swimmer. I always have been."

There were master's events at the meet. He must have been taking part in a few races, as well as speaking to his potential voters.

"Did you happen to watch? The Mars landing?"

"Oh, sure."

"Wasn't it wonderful?"

"Yeah," I said, without a shred of doubt. "It was great."

"Humans have now walked on Mars," he remarked. Then he used the Chinese word for the planet, adding, "This is a great day for our little world."

I couldn't agree more.

"Is your father here?"

I pointed in a vague direction.

"I need to speak to him, if I could. I want to thank him."

"For what?"

"A great deal, the way I hear it told." Then he winked at me, commenting, "We have the same good friend, I understand." And he named Nathan's grandfather.

For half a second, I thought about him sleeping with his secretary.

I didn't say one word.

"Walk me to your father, please."

"Okay."

We left the pool, moving at a strong pace. "This is a wonderful world we live in. Did you know that, Samuel?"

"I guess. . . ."

"We're blessed." He kept chuckling, reminding me, "We're walking on Mars. People are well-fed, and mostly educated. There are no important wars at the moment. And diseases have been mostly eradicated."

I nodded, and smiled nervously.

"In a different century," he said, "you would have had to worry. About measles, and polio, and the mumps."

"I've had my shots," I said.

"Exactly." Then he patted me on the shoulder, saying, "I have weak eyes. Yet I don't wear glasses."

"There's a surgery," I said. "If you're rich. . . ."

I let my voice collapse. Was it stupid, calling him rich?

But he just laughed it off, telling me, "I wish everyone could have these advantages. And I think one day-sooner than you could guess-everybody will have them."

Confident and a little cocky, I chimed in, "I'm sorry. But I'm too young to vote for you."

He barely noticed my joke.

"End the tariffs, and the censors, and open up our markets . . . if we can finally join with the rest of the world in every meaningful way . . . that's what I think we need to do. . . ."

I wasn't sure whom he was talking to.



"If I run for President of the New Lands," he asked, "sometime in the next few years, would you vote for me, Samuel?"

"No," I reported. "I'm voting for my father."

He laughed, and walked faster, and I had to practically run to keep up with his long, happy strides.