

2003 Brookie & D. K. Brown Fiction Contest Sunstone Winner

HEALTHY PARTNERS

By Lewis Horne

BRUDEN HAD NO TROUBLE sleeping at night, however hot and airless the house in August. Which some people might find strange since they wouldn't think he hustled enough during the day to tire. But they couldn't know how tiring his days were. Still, at night, the traffic on Circle Drive, two blocks away, and the noise from the bar around the corner, however rackety, didn't jostle his steady, naked doze.

Even so, whenever Ian John came in, however quietly he moved in his stocking feet, as irregular as his dark hours were, Bruden's eyes snapped open. The kitchen door would barely scrape the worn linoleum. The soles of Ian John's feet would whisper by Bruden's door, slip inaudibly past Wolfgang's across the way. Scarcely a sound from the large bedroom Ian John had claimed—the only room in the house with a mattress on a bed-frame, a queen-size at that. Then, assured that Ian John had settled, sleep fell on Bruden again.

At first, Wolfgang had slept in the big room—after all, the house was his—but within a week of moving in, Ian John had suckered him out of it.

Tonight, Ian John stopped at Bruden's door.

No word from the full boyish lips.

In the street light from outside, Bruden could see how spruce he looked. Like he'd stepped out of the Bessborough Hotel.

"What you want, man?" Bruden finally asked.

"I want some help. It's heavy."

Most of the stuff Ian John brought in was light—fishing equipment, leather clothing, air compressors, tools—or else for something like a big TV or filing cabinet, there was a dolly.

"A love seat. It's awkward."



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As Bruden pulled on his faded trousers, Ian John said, "We could be partners, you know. I told you before."

Bruden didn't answer. Though he'd heard it before, he didn't want to huddle too close to Ian John and his trespasses—his girls and loot and secrets. You'd never learn all Ian John's secrets, and unless you did, you could never stand up to him, never be a full-fledged partner.

In the dark, Bruden made himself look into Ian John's pale eyes. He shrugged his bare shoulders—no comment—at the renewed proposition and grinned what he knew was a sheepish grin. The less you said to Ian John, the less you committed.

Ian John wanted the love seat in the house instead of the garage with the padlocked double doors. They bumped the wall of the hallway twice on the way to the living room, almost upset a pile of wooden picture frames outside Wolfgang's door.

"He won't wake," said Ian John. "He takes pills."

They placed the love seat in a corner of the living room. Now he could watch TV in comfort, Ian John said. Though Bruden seldom saw him watching, seldom saw him in the house.

As Bruden turned, Ian John said, "Partners, man. Healthy ones. I could give you thirty percent."

"I do okay," said Bruden.

"Two is stronger than one. You think about it."

NEXT DAY. HIS regular spot.

What should he think?

"No, I won't give you money," the man said, though he spoke in a pleasant manner with a pleasant smile in a pleasant healthy face.

Bruden watched a street-corner breeze lace thin hair. Usually, "Any change?" was all he could get out before the person crossed the street to enter the mall. But often enough, often enough to make it worth his hours out here, two or three times in the day, someone would slip him coins. Now, with a

loonie—a one dollar coin—in circulation, sums increased. Pretty soon the two-dollar coin would be out.

(Think of that, Ian John.)

“But,” continued the man with his smile, “I’ll take you home and give you a meal. My wife cooks well. I don’t do bad either, for that matter.”

Bruden didn’t blink. “You think I’m asking for a handout.”

“Aren’t you?”

“Some people don’t approve of handouts. They say people should help themselves.”

“I’m willing to help you,” the man said.

“But no handout.”

“Not from me.”

Bruden—a thin-faced man with pale disheveled hair, straight and loose, some of it hanging over his forehead—said, “I guess I’ll take you up on it.”

“My car’s in the lot,” said the man. “I got off work early today. I work at furniture in Sears. Salary and commission. I worked late last night so I can take off early today.” He pointed up an alley. “My car’s in this lot.”

The car was an old-style luxury model. A Buick maybe. A crack ran across the passenger side of the windshield. But Bruden knew the man had never bought the car new. First of all, he wasn’t old enough to have afforded it when it was new. Second, his twisted tie and wrinkled white shirt didn’t go with a new car such as this one would have been. The tie and shirt went with the way it was now—used, unwashed.

“Dog hairs on the back seat,” said the man. “The dog’s dead, but we haven’t gotten rid of the dog hairs yet. My wife’s car is cleaner. You can toss those empty bags on the back seat.”

His wife’s car might be cleaner, Bruden decided, gathering up the garbage, but it wouldn’t hold any more promise than the four-door Buick. Hers would be an economy model more than likely, maybe foreign compact. Something for her to zip to work in. Probably in just as big a need of a wash. Bruden was the sort who knew these things, what other people couldn’t see. He wasn’t psychic, but he had enough of the eye to get glimpses. Like he couldn’t see the man’s wife, but he knew her car. Bruden considered himself half-psychic. Where else did his pictures of Ian John come from?

“Incidentally, I’m Horace,” said the man as he turned the ignition.

“Bruden.”

“What’s that?”

Bruden spoke louder. He spelled the name. “Like it sounds.”

“Good to meet you, Mr. Bruden. If you wouldn’t mind fastening the seatbelt.”

Like they were buddies.

BRUDEN HAD BEEN standing at the corner for three hours, though much of the time he’d been leaning against the wall, saving himself wear on his back. Thinking sometimes of Ian John, sometimes of other things. He’d been about to go into

the mall for a rest when Horace approached. He couldn’t see ahead what kind of meal he’d be getting. With money—a handout—he could measure the coins. Not a fancy eater, a hamburger would do as well as Chinese food. Then the rest of the coins he would tuck away in his hiding spot in the house.

Wolfgang and Ian John—in the house, they had their hiding spots, too. He knew where Ian John’s was, behind a stone in the basement wall, but he’d never checked it out. Ian John had his mean streak. Bruden wished Wolfgang would send Ian John traveling, but Wolfgang was afraid, even if the house was his. Since his mother died a year ago. How long he’d have it Bruden didn’t know, since Wolfgang refused to pay property taxes. “I’m not paying the city to live in my own house.” Bruden asked him where they’d be if the city took the house from him. “With Ian John,” said Wolfgang. “But not without a fight.”

Wolfgang, a dim little butterball of a man, was hard to persuade.

Ian John had been in prison. This was a fact Bruden had seen first thing that Wolfgang hadn’t. Ian John wouldn’t mention prison, a closed-mouth sort like him.

“You passing through?” asked Horace behind the steering wheel, proving that Horace himself hadn’t an ounce of the energy, not a bit of the eye, wasn’t a quarter- or an eighth-psychic.

Bruden started to say he lived with a couple of friends. But he said, “Yeah. Just passing through.”

“A bit down on your luck,” said Horace.

“You could say that.”

“It happens to us all. But in different ways, I guess.”

Horace’s seatbelt was tight across his belly. He’d have a pot belly if he wasn’t already heavy enough that the belly—to the front, to the sides—seemed like a part of his general roundness. A kind of robust look it was. Almost.

“Good Samaritan,” said Horace.

“What’s that?”

“You know the story.”

As Horace began to tell it, Bruden said, “Yeah, I know it.”

“Sometimes you might be walking the road, healthy as can be. Other times, you might be in the ditch. So you do what you can when you can.”

“I guess I’m in the ditch.”

“Not trying to offend,” said Horace.

Bruden stared through the windshield at the traffic. He felt no offense, but he didn’t say so. He hoped Wolfgang would pay his taxes. Life’s a ten-cent magazine, and if you’ve only got a nickel, you go with the nickel.

“Got any music?” he said.

“Sorry,” said Horace and turned the knob on the car radio.

“Where you passing through from?”

“Edmonton.”

“I have a sister there,” said Horace.

“Me, too.”

“That right?”

“Another one in San Diego—and one in Thunder Bay. Then there’s one that lives outside Toronto—” The pictures kept flashing in Bruden’s head. But he stopped. They weren’t real

pictures. They were games. He had no sisters. He didn't mind games. But you had to be credible with people. He added, "The last one lives in northern Idaho the last I heard. Haven't seen her since I was a kid, not after she run away from home. She stays in touch with the sister in Edmonton—off and on."

That was enough. He rubbed his fingers on his jeans, then the palms of his hands.

Horace had turned the car into a residential area, older frame houses with some large Manchurian elm trees. Some of the houses were narrow and two-story. Most were one story.

It looked to Bruden like Horace's neighborhood as much as the old Buick looked like Horace's car.

"Woozie and I have three children—"

"Woozie?"

"Her name's Claire. But people call her Woozie."

"What does she call you?"

"Horace."

"Oh."



**Well, hon, it's better than
a handout. He even offered
to mow the lawn.**

Horace laughed. "It's just Woozie—what her father and mother called her. I was always Horace."

"That is good, isn't it," said Bruden as Horace came to a stop before one of the two-story houses.

"What is?"

"I don't know. That you got Woozie. That her name is Woozie. That you got three kids."

"Sid is the only one at home."

"Sid and Woozie."

Horace unbuckled his seatbelt. "His sisters have their own families. Sid was our accident. An afterthought. He's in high school."

The street was narrow, the houses across the way seeming close-up, as close-up as the two-story house with the glassed-in porch and the lawn that needed mowing.

Bruden said, "Maybe you should show me where the lawnmower is."

Horace took him seriously. "No, no. I invited you to supper—"

"Don't want any handout."

"An invitation to supper," said Horace. "Fair and square."

At the top of the front steps, Bruden found the glassed-in porch warm from the sun. A folded newspaper lay on one of the wicker chairs. A bag of fertilizer and a bag of peat moss, both opened, stood in one corner. Bruden left his shoes beside Horace's outside the door. Horace's shoes must smell, too. For sure, Bruden's wingtips weren't giving off all the stink.

As he followed Horace into the living room, stairs on the

right next to a coat closet, he saw a room that matched the picture he'd already made in his head. What Ian John might notice. The couch, the chair that went with it, were possibly second-hand, maybe gotten from a relative, and had held up under a lot of butts, all shapes and sizes. The cushions' dark floral pattern had faded too deep to show much anymore. The throw rugs on the floor, throw rugs on top of an oatmeal-colored wall-to-wall, were dark, too. Bruden could tell from the feel of the place—like the doors had been closed since morning—that no one else had been home all day.

"Woozie at work?"

"At the school board," said Horace. "Something to drink?"

Bruden would have liked a beer, but he shook his head when Horace said, "I could mix up some lemonade. No problem." Then he said, "I better call Woozie."

Bruden couldn't get a picture of Woozie, not even when he heard Horace saying, "Yeah, it's like the last time, Woozie. It will all work out." Silence on Woozie's behalf. "Well, hon, it's

better than a handout. He even offered to mow the lawn."

Horace appeared around the door. "Woozie told me to put potatoes in the oven. Why don't you relax?"

Looking about from the chair he eased himself into, Bruden decided this was how the house of his sister in Edmonton would look. Over the fireplace was a colored photograph of a church-looking building. A big one. To its side was a framed photograph of three men. No surprise that Woozie and Horace were churchgoers.

Someone close at hand had drawn the framed picture above the couch, he decided, crouched figures with faces distorted like those in a cartoon except the faces were frightened, not funny. It was the Tower of Babel, he thought, and language was being confounded. His sister in Edmonton would have had mountains, maybe the Swiss Alps, from a furniture store where she bought her couch. By the front window that had lace curtains, Woozie had a table with a bowl of dry flowers on it, a big bowl with stiff blossoms.

Horace was humming in the kitchen as he scrubbed potatoes under running water.

Better than coins on the street? Ian John would say so. Wolfgang wanted to clear out his garage, but he couldn't do it without Ian John taking care of the stuff he'd stacked there. Whenever Ian John took something out, he'd bring in something else to take its place. Computer, radio, bicycle, speakers. Best to know nothing of Ian John with his sweet smile.

Horace handed Bruden the folded newspaper. "Haven't had a chance to read it myself. Sometimes I don't care to know

what's going on. Woozie thinks I'm too free and easy, not caring what's going on. A free spirit, she calls me."

"Because you don't care what goes on?"

Horace grinned. "Yeah."

Bruden noticed the bowl of shiny fruit on the dining room table. "That stuff real?" said Bruden.

"The fruit?" Horace laughed. "You want fruit, you eat what's on the kitchen table. *That's* real."

After a few seconds, Horace yawned and lay back on the couch. "Don't be upset if I doze off. Middle of the day—unless I keep moving—"

"I know the feeling."

Horace talked a bit more. Woozie's brother drew the picture above the couch, he said. Woozie had to stop at the store on the way home. Bruden mumbled as Horace commented. If he shifted, he could catch his own putrid odor, released from some enclosed part of his body, the sourness of his own folds and openings.

Then Horace's eyes began to slip back into his head mid-sentence or his eyelids fluttered like they were fragile and light. Before long he was out, the couch sunken under his heavy body, his head on a pillow, his stocking feet on the upholstered arm, his mouth open.

BRUDEN LEFT THE newspaper on the chair. On the rug, his footsteps were as soundless as Ian John's. The banana on the dining room table was wax, sure enough. In the kitchen, sunny with the afternoon light, he peeled one of the bananas from the basket there. It took him three bites, three bites that didn't satisfy his belly. He dropped the peel in the kitchen sink, still wet from Horace's scrubbing. He could feel the heat from the stove's oven. A calendar on the refrigerator had days marked, notes entered. "Band practice." "Young Men's." "Camp." Sure enough, Woozie would an organized sort.

On top of the refrigerator was a quart-sized Mason jar more than half full of coins. A good supply of loonies along with quarters and dimes and pennies. The label on the jar read "Sidney's mission." Would Sidney miss a couple of loonies? Bruden's long fingers caught one and then another. He replaced the jar and stared at the two coins in his hand. These were what Horace might have given him on the street. He looked at the oven where the potatoes were baking and at the banana peel in the sink. Then with a shrug, he dropped the coins back into the jar.

The carpeted stairs creaked a couple of times, but Horace was dead to the universe.

What furniture Wolfgang had in his house was scarred by Wolfgang's cigarettes. A table was wobbly from a fight Wolfgang had gotten into with two kids who'd broken into the house. That was one night before Ian John came and when Bruden was gone. Wolfgang's house had an empty feel.

Because it had so much furniture, Horace's house felt crowded. Photographs hung on one side of the upstairs hallway. Family photos. A nearly empty bookcase took up the

other wall. The few books—*Man's Search for Happiness*, *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, and others with titles like them—didn't slow Bruden. Hardly any books did.

Behind one open doorway was Horace and Woozie's bedroom, a large room almost filled by Horace and Woozie's four-poster bed. It had a white spread over it and colored pillows piled against the headboard. The open drapes were white, and the walls had blue-and-green-striped wallpaper. Bruden knew he'd never have seen that, not this bedroom in his head—not the plush throw rugs, not the floor-to-ceiling mirrors on the closet doors. Hardly room in it to stroll.

He glanced in two more rooms. One on which the curtains were pulled was filled with boxes, extra chairs. In the other, a girl's room, not lived in either, the bed was piled with clothes, with what looked like sleeping bags and tent poles.

Then, he came to Sid's room at the end of the hall. Could have seen this one without a blink—if he'd tried. A pair of jeans and a couple of shirts tossed on a straight-back chair. A pair of rumpled jockey briefs on the floor with some athletic socks. Woozie must have made the bed. A wall closet along with a wardrobe. When he opened the wall closet, he saw a pile of junk—a discarded radio, tennis racket, baseball glove, CDs, some rolled-up posters, boxes of school paraphernalia.

Sid's clothes hung in the wardrobe. The kind you didn't notice because so many of the kids you saw wore them—baggy pants, baggy shirts, scuffy running shoes. You'd notice Bruden's clothes because they were unwashed and worn. You'd notice the clothes other people wore because they were sometimes fresh and expensive get-ups. But you wouldn't notice Sid's clothes anymore than you would notice Horace's. Maybe you wouldn't notice Sid himself.

On Sid's desk was a Bible. Not only that—an open Bible. Born again? And another one, except it was a Book of Mormon—also opened.

On his walls, Sid had posters. No rock musicians like Bruden would have seen if he'd formed anything in his head, but animals—a purple hippopotamus, some penguins, a wise-looking elephant—saying things you were supposed to laugh at. Maybe Sid was a boy who needed to laugh. Maybe he was a boy who laughed too much.

Bruden took up the discarded jeans from the chair. At first, they felt as though they might have something in the pockets, but a search with his thin fingers found him nothing.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

Bruden didn't drop the jeans. He had no intention of showing surprise. "You're Sid." A big boy, taller than his father, in a loose T-shirt half way to his knees. Still, baggy as the shirt was, Sid looked strong, lithe, quick. Bruden couldn't remember whether he'd seen an athletic trophy or not. Sid had some of his father's features, broad-planed cheekbones, brown eyes you'd call on another occasion "earnest," maybe well-meaning. But now startled and angry.

Be glad I'm not Ian John, he could have said. With Ian John's strong hands and knife-clean looks. Be glad it's only this wobbly bundle of bones and sinew called Bruden.

"Did my father bring you here?"

"Your father's napping."

Sid snatched his jeans. "He brought you, didn't he? Get out of here."

"Your father's invited me to supper."

"Not in my room he didn't."

Passing Sid with his grim jaw—*No, I'm not Ian John*—Bruden stopped at a couple of the photos in the hallway. Horace and Sid with—Bruden assumed—Woozie and the two sisters. He peered closely at Woozie in shorts, squinting against the sun. The Grand Canyon. The Mormon temple in Salt Lake. Disneyland.

"Get going," said Sid. "Don't stare."

"Family holidays?"

"You don't need to know about me. It's private."

"What's private?"

"Our lives. Us."

Unhurried, Sid's breath heavy behind him, though he remained at the top of the stairs, Bruden entered the living room. Horace had scarcely twitched, hands folded on his belly. After he sat in the matching chair, when he saw that Sid had moved into the kitchen, Bruden let his head rest on the back of the chair.



**But our lives are
private, Mom.
We're not on TV.**

He must have dozed off because next thing he heard voices in the kitchen—voices and Horace's snoring. Woozie must be home. "I got a salmon to poach," he heard, though Bruden knew salmon was not the subject of the conversation. The two—Woozie and Sid—spoke softly. But not so he wouldn't hear. More like they didn't want to wake Horace. Sid didn't care what buddy-Bruden heard.

"But our lives are private, Mom. We're not on TV."

"I can't change your father," she said. Her voice was clean in tone, her speech unhurried, each syllable making its way at its own pace. Her voice was as strongly inflected as Sid's with pitch and emphasis wide and varied.

"He doesn't have to keep bringing these guys home."

"It's just the last couple of months. Wait, and before you know it will be something else. Your father has good intents. He believes in charity, not a handout."

"So the guy spends the money Dad might have given him," he said, "on beer—"

"That's what bothers your father."

"So the bum buys liquor."

"It's the principle, dear. If the man is starving—"

"The guy upstairs isn't starving."

Bruden smiled slightly.

"And he smells," said Sid. "They all do."

"Not the old fellow last week."

"Oh, Mom—"

"Just think 'free spirit.'"

She must have kissed the boy on the cheek. He heard a kitchen chair move.

"I'm still waiting for you to clean your bedroom," said Woozie.

"I feel like I should fumigate it now."

"You want to set the table? Forks on the left."

About time. Bruden had been hungry when he settled in Horace's Buick, when he ate the banana, when he searched Sid's jeans. Now, his belly had started its hubbub.

HE ATE HALF the salmon, and he could have eaten a second baked potato. "A little man like that," he could hear Woozie tell a neighbor later. "All that sour cream." Tomatoes and lettuce from the garden, tumbled in a salad, went down like nothing. Fresh from his nap, Horace put it away, too. "Must have dozed," he said, as though nobody had noticed.

Bruden didn't flinch at Sid's scowl. The more he ignored it, the deeper it went. But that was Sid's business.

Sid sat across the dining room table from Bruden, Horace across from

Woozie. Bruden would never have formed Woozie in his head. Woozie had a round face, healthy smooth skin and dark eyes with a crackle to them, and a smile bright as a puppet's. She was tall as Horace and as heavy, though not so heavy from the waist up. She was heavy in the hips, wide in her denim skirt, her legs wide around.

She liked her free-spirited husband, Bruden could tell, tolerating his open ways with dinner plans. She didn't pull a face at the way Bruden smelled when she shook his hand, giving his fingers a good squeeze.

"I'm Woozie. And I guess you've met Sid."

"Yeah, we've met," said Sid.

Bruden wasn't a talker, so he nodded. He knew that his wasn't an eye for seeing virtues in others. By habit, he'd shape the bad. But it was hard to see right away much bad in Woozie. Not like Sid. Seeing Sid reminded him that he sent out a stink, that his clothes hadn't been changed since . . . the last time. He saw Sids of some sort every day of his life. "We're private," Sid had said. "Our lives are private."

Woozie gave him store-bought ice cream for dessert. Sid said he didn't want any.

"You sure? It's chocolate ripple, one of your favorites."

"I don't want any."

When Woozie put a bowl in front of Bruden, Sid said, "May I be excused. I want to check my bedroom again."

"Maybe pick up a bit, too," called Woozie as he stomped up the stairs. "Seems like I barely look back and there he is two years old and spoiled by his sisters. Ten and twelve they were then."

"I never look back," said Bruden. "No future in it."

Horace laughed. "No future in it. That's pretty good."

Bruden started to say he hadn't tried to be funny. You didn't get ahead by looking back. Pure and simple.

Woozie told Horace he'd have to remember the line next time he gave a talk at church. Horace had a fine sense of humor, she said, and was always keen for a good clean joke.

After Bruden finished his ice cream, Horace said, "Whenever you're ready. I'll drive you back downtown—or wherever you want to go. But take your time."

"Downtown will be fine."

Woozie stood at the door as he and Horace put on their shoes.

"Thanks for supper," he said. "And—" he tacked it on as an afterthought, wishing Sid were there to hear—"for letting me into your privacy."

WOLFGANG WAS SITTING on the love seat, watching a TV newscast about a break-in the night before, someone hospitalized, but he followed Bruden into his room with its unmade mattress on the floor.

He listened with wide, unblinking eyes. "You mean he just invited you home for supper—this guy you never seen?"

Bruden patted his belly, putting it on for Wolfgang, who was missing half of what should be in his head. "Just like a five-star restaurant." He fished the coins he'd collected earlier that day from his pocket and placed them in a bowl on a chair by his pillow. He'd hide them later. His own private doings.

The walls and floor were bare in Wolfgang's house. If only Wolfgang could get it into his head about taxes. Too heavy for his feet with three toes missing from a thirty-below night outdoors, the little man would only squint and laugh, showing which teeth were gone.

"You had salmon," he said, "and baked potato and sour cream. And what else?"

"Make that half of the salmon all to myself."

"Like you said."

"Half a salmon?" Ian John was suddenly in the room from out of doors. He was that way, appearing with a phrase, slipping forward without a creak. He sank to the floor next to Wolfgang, crossing his long legs like Wolfgang. If you knew Ian John and his ways, knew the real Ian John, you'd think he'd crawled out of a dirty river somewhere. But just looking at him, not knowing him, the young man with the basketball player's build could have been using a private swimming pool.

Ian John smiled as Bruden repeated his story. Bruden had

no fear of Ian John. What he didn't like were Ian John's smooth face and his groomed blond hair that one of his girlfriends trimmed for him. A face that looked open and honest, and eyes—hazel, green-tinted—that would convince an unwitting listener the words coming from his mouth were God's truth. You can trust me, buddy.

Ian John whistled. "No lie. And his wife is named Woozie? What kind of house they have?"

Bruden described the house.

"Where is it, man?"

Bruden held back a second, looking into the deeply colored eyes. Then he shrugged. "Man, I don't remember. I get lost in them residential areas. One street's like another."

"You're bullshitting me. Where's he live?"

"Why you want to know?"

Ian John chuckled. "Don't make me say it."

"I don't want you to say it. I get lost in those residential areas. That's all."

Ian John glanced at Wolfgang, who was understanding—maybe understanding—with an open mouth. Ian John took Bruden's arm. "Come with me," he said. Bruden stumbled after him into the living room. Ian John turned on a floor lamp and sat on the love seat, his legs extended before him, crossed at the ankles. He gestured Bruden to sit beside him. "Now, let's have it again. You forget. You get lost."

"That's right."

"Then where'd you meet him? This Horace? Tell me about it."

In the darkness last night, Bruden hadn't been able to see how new, how well cared-for, the love seat was. He ran his fingers across the smooth, patterned surface, violet and dark green, the shapes that lay between him and Ian John.

Another shrug. "You know. Here and there."

"Here-and-there where, man? Or is that your private affair?"

Bruden traced a flower. He remembered the way Woozie had squeezed his fingers, the way Horace's tie twisted as he dozed. He could have drawn a map to their place. But then the picture came strong inside his head: Ian John on the stairs. Not here in this house, Wolfgang's house, but in the hallway outside Horace and Woozie's bedroom. Inside the bedroom, one head to a pillow. One chummy body to each side of the bed, amiable and true. The red numbers on the bedside clock at 2:45 a.m.

"What's the matter, partner?" said Ian John. "You forget that, too?"

"I guess that's it," Bruden said. Horace and Woozie slept soundly, full of trust. Unlike Sid. Ian John might understand Sid. But Horace and Woozie—Bruden could see the rise and fall of their breathing, steady and calm. "I don't remember. Like I forget that, too." ☺



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