

Michael Conn

Maiden Flight

It was twenty-three manicured acres of privileged seclusion until Brad saw the reporter perched in an oak tree. She was eyeing him from beyond the eight foot stone wall that ran the perimeter of his parents' Virginia estate. He kept walking, paralleling the fat limb she was sitting on, trying to recapture his zen-like mood, his yogic breathing, his we are all one with the cosmos, unpracticed at the art though he was. His thoughts turned to a beanbag gun, like the ones that bounty hunters used, and he imagined two bags aimed right at her chest, pow-pow, her arms flailing out, her legs whipping back over her head, her shoes the last thing he saw. She could write a tell-all best seller, flash the twin welts on her chest at Mike Wallace on *60 Minutes*, win a Pulitzer for having four nipples.

He cut a meandering path away from her, clasping his hands behind his back, heading for the sculpture garden, coining a title in his head for her book: *Cornered in the Home of his Childhood*, which he had to admit pretty well described his current situation. Around front at the iron gates of his parents' estate reporters milled in numbers so large that private security men had been deployed to form a human colonnade, linked arm-in-arm, lining the way for liveried chauffeurs to deliver guests to the wake. Inside the house, despite its baronial expanse, the mourning had grown so claustrophobic, the jangling of the phones so incessant, the sympathies so humid, that he'd ventured out here every few hours to let off some steam unobserved. He wasn't about to give up his strolling rights to one intrusive reporter, there were a myriad of places to screen himself, the greenhouse the pool house the topiary where he had played as a boy. But in the sculpture garden now he heard the telltale click-whir-clicks, and looking up from the sinuous lines of a Henry Moore bronze he saw them, an unholy shooting gallery of them, their arms propped atop the stone wall, the May sun glinting off their telephoto lenses. The snoop in the tree must have tipped them off. *Christ!* Betrayed by a woman who hadn't even bothered to learn to dislike him.

Skulking through an arboretum of cherry trees, the last withered dregs of their pink blossoms littering his way, Brad reentered the house by a

service entrance, avoiding the crush of murmuring relatives, friends, and colleagues (no clients, of course, there was the media, you see, although the Bush White House had sent its sincerest condolences in the person of Brad's mother's best friend, Kitty). It wasn't like Brad was ducking his responsibilities. He'd done his time in the reception line, the two-handed handshakes, the nodding pensively at well intentioned remarks, even replying "how dear of you" when an aunt he hadn't seen in years told him she thought that the urn looked "at peace." It was that outside just now he'd felt like a cheetah in a wildlife preserve, circled by buses full of tourists. He was hovering here for a while, that's all, in the hallway that led to the pantry, pausing to savor the quiet. But then the creak of a nearby door sent him scurrying for privacy up three flights of back stairs to the attic. It was an immense white room, the attic, crowning the entire mansion, with a vaulted ceiling and teakwood floor, and not so much as a distracting chair or lamp. Like a gymnasium built for pacing.

He strolled the two hundred forty-one feet each way, down, back, pausing occasionally to glare out a dormer window at the reporters gathered below at the gates. *Visibility*. How he and his father *loathed* Visibility. They were lobbyists, like the twenty-six other lawyers they employed at the family firm. They preferred to be heard and not seen. Their art was slight of hand. Private jets, Cayman banks, favors whispered into the right ears. A distant hum emerged as the whirly-whap of a helicopter that came making a fly-by, too low, too close, then it returned to hover overhead. It could only be the media. How nice it would've been, Brad thought, to have a sniper posted on the roof.

Bored with the sound of his own footfalls, Brad went roaming into a wing off the attic, a room above two floors of servant's quarters and a five-car garage. In it were rows of his paternal grandparents' furniture, draped in sheets. Along the far wall stood a Louis Vuitton steamer trunk, bearing his grandmother's initials in gold leaf: *S.L.T.* It was an upright, on its end, and inside it were seven drawers faced with raw silk. All were empty except for the bottom drawer, which held four caches of envelopes. Two were wrapped in pink ribbons, two in blue. His grandparents' love letters, written during the summer and autumn months of 1936, while they were stealthy young lovers, courting.

After reading a random seven of their feverish longings, Brad whipped two muslins off a long refectory table, arranged the letters in a chronological checkerboard on the table, and read *all* of the letters, his jaw hanging slack, each letter confirming the *flagrante delicto* that arose writhing from the first one, his read quickening as he worked his way along the table, as though his pulse were setting the pace. At last he pushed himself up, backing away from the table as if it had spoken. Twilight shrouded the draped furniture with dusty pink, creeping him out, spurring him back to the main attic. Standing mid-room, unsure of his bearings, he heard footsteps rising in the stairwell, and turned to see his mother's young household secretary. Wearing an exasperation that seemed to say she had searched all thirty-seven rooms to find him, she relayed his mother's request that he deliver himself for the supper and eulogy with their fifty-six houseguests.

"What?" he asked. "Oh, yes. Of course." Then he hastened her down ahead of him so it wouldn't look like he were being towed behind her, and strode to a dormer window to bestow his parting bouquet on the reporters below. "Media pukes," he hissed down at them, using his pet name for their ilk. As if they could actually *hear* him.

His grandparents' courtship had gone like this: His grandfather had been a young White House counsel (this much Brad already knew) at a time when Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the sitting president, was carrying on an illicit affair with an exquisite young prostitute named Sophie. And it was part of Brad's grandfather's job description to sneak Sophie out through a White House side entrance at each conclusion of her twice-a-week frolics with Franklin. When Roosevelt decided to end the affair, he called upon his only confidant on the matter, Brad's grandfather (who had fallen secretly in love with Sophie), to "encourage the trollop's interests away"--as Roosevelt so delicately put it. The issue was resolved to everyone's satisfaction, of course (since steamy letters had been going back and forth behind Roosevelt's back for near on six months). After a honeymoon in Tahiti with Sophie, Brad's grandfather founded a lobbying firm that enjoyed--as it did to this day, nine presidents later--immediate success in mining the power corridors of the nation's capital, with free and curiously regular access to the oval office.

"Fuck it all to *fuck*," Brad grouched as he trundled down three flights of coffered mahogany stairwell. Before today, he'd never had cause to question his lineage. He was "the only blooded Tremont," a mantra his father had drummed into him from boyhood on, the only son of the only son of the only son. Bradford Lloyd Tremont III, goddammit, the sole heir to the family firm. And as Brad passed by the library on the main floor, the salon where first ladies had sipped tea and spoke in polite tones about poverty, drugs, and unwed mothers, he hated his dead brother Joey all over again. His *half*-brother, the black sheep, the baggage from his widowed mother's first marriage. The cowardly suicide who wasn't even a real Tremont. How much courage did it take to slit one's wrists and bleed out in a marble bath of warm water? It was so fucking Roman. And the cause of all this *fucking visibility*.

Once, when Brad was eleven and Joey fourteen, Brad stepped up to bat for his prep school team. It was the bottom of the ninth inning, the score was tied. Poised in the batter's box, he had already ripped two triples to left-center field, and now wasn't getting anything worth swinging at, when a sizzling fastball clipped the brim of his helmet and smacked just wide of his eye. Dropped to his knees he blinked away a galaxy of exploding stars, and found his hand splayed on home plate. His coach's warped loafers hurried toward him. The catcher, a plump little fart with freckles, sneered at Brad from behind a grillwork mask. Brad pushed to his feet, loopy, telling the catcher to "kiss my ass," a sardonic grin wanting to tumble off Brad's face. Fending off his coach, he started toward first base at what felt like a major league trot.

In his dazed state his bench mates and the bleachers beyond them looked like blurry petunias on a pastoral canvas, their cheers sounding like an underwater broadcast. He knew that Joey loomed in that crowd, somewhere, watching him, not sitting with Mother, standing beside the bleachers, maybe, or under them peering out, his stare sullen, the way it turned whenever it fell on Brad. *Bite this one, Joey*. Reaching first base Brad pirouetted on the bag, facing the pitcher who faced him, glove hand on the pitcher's hip. Brad shot the pitcher a slow deliberate "bird," drawing it up from his side, and took a bold lead off first base, his feet spaced wide, his hands braced on his thighs, eyeing the pitcher's every feint, every twitch. Something warm dripped from Brad's chin, blotting

the dirt between his feet, and the base path fluttered to black.

He was a tough little nut, even while suffering three stitches so close to his eye that the prep school's physician didn't use Novocain. And with Joey watching from the examining room doorway, wearing the look of someone who remembered meeting you but couldn't recall when, there wasn't so much as a whimper from Brad. There was, after all, a legacy to uphold, one to which Joey could own no claim. If Brad had learned only one thing from his father it was this: Heredity, bloodlines, Tremont. Anything else was handicapped and meant to be rolled out of the way. Even if the two boys had somehow been born identical twins no one could then or ever have mistaken one for the other. Joey the brawler and habitual truant at St. George's Prep, Brad the school's valedictorian; Joey the College of We-Take-Anyone-Who-Can-Afford-The-Steep-Tuition dropout, Brad the Harvard Phi Beta Kappa--and second in his class at the Kennedy School of Government; Joey the ne'er-do-well who routinely squandered his quarterly trust fund allowance before the next installment was due, Brad the young laird of capitol hill. Joey the craven suicide.

Joey's memorial was held in the ballroom, with a long table for immediate family that looked out over nine round tables draped in black. Brad sat down between his father and mother. His mother's fingers were laced at her opposite side with her dearest friend Kitty's, forming a single fist. His father stood, then, the lion of Capital Hill, as Brad was settling into his chair, his annoyance over Brad having delayed the affair palpable, though to Brad alone. The only thing missing was the commanding glint in his father's eye, the way he glowered atop the firm and the Tremont family pedestal. He spoke about the fond relationship that "might have been," that might some day have developed between him and Joey. Yeah. A man in full, Brad's father. A consummate liar. He'd never once in Brad's lifetime even spoken Joey's name. "Young Pommeroy," he'd called him, using the surname of Joey's dead father. He'd spared little affection for Joey in life much less in death. There'd never been a place for Joey at the family firm and never would've been. And to Brad (the only blooded Tremont, descended from a whore), the ballroom seemed gassed with duplicities. He couldn't decide how to feel about it, except that he didn't dare to so much as glance aside at his

mother.

He looked out over the guests, the dead zone in their eyes, fifty-six lugubrious faces, each intent on his father's words. Brad's moment to stand up and deliver the brief eulogy he'd written and memorized was coming. They would all soon be looking at him. Composing a mask of compassion, he thrust out his chin, drew a deep breath, his father's voice diminishing to a buzz in his ear, and went searching for his Zen-like mood, again, his we are all one with the cosmos. But a line from his past came interrupting--*In humans we call that denial*--and looped through his head like a song lyric that wouldn't go away, taking him back to the events of a quail hunt he had hosted last October.

His two companions on that hunt had been a southern senator, who was chairman of a commission investigating defense contractor corruption, and the CEO of one of the consortiums the commission was investigating. They were strolling behind a sinewy trio of short-haired retrievers, perusing the manicured fields and waist-high sorghum of Berensford Keep, a private club in Maryland. Brad had bagged three quail, having held off on nine others so the senator could miss them in turn, and the CEO had bagged five. Smoke from the senator's Cuban Montecristo spiced a languid autumnal breeze. Ahead on the crest of a rise, amid colorful bastions of turning sycamore and oak, sprawled the fieldstone and slate-roofed grandeur of Greater Berensford Hall itself. It was a splendid day for perverting the public trust.

Brad was letting the older men talk, letting the CEO play his part in serenading the senator's clout. They chortled and boasted and postured away, exchanging common interests, bonding like long lost frat brothers, bloated on the majesty of their stations in life, self-impressed by the same brand of bullshit that had gotten them there. Educated

idiots, Brad mused, smart enough to tackle momentous responsibilities yet dumb enough to fuck them up thoroughly. A sudden cackle and a rush of wings spun Brad around. A pheasant, a rooster with a green head and regal plumage, was winging its escape across the trace where they'd just walked. A *wild* pheasant. The club planted only partridge and quail in these fields (concealing them like Easter eggs, before each hunt), and

everyone but the dogs knew they would be there. But here was rogue sport. A plump trophy. Rory the club guide nodded to Brad, and Brad swung the sites of his rare, vintage, priceless, twenty-gauge double-barreled Beretta to the fleeing bird.

"That's gotta be thirty yards or more," complained the senator, a jowly reprobate with a triple chin that swaddled his throat. "That ol' peashooter a yours'll be lucky to get close enough ta hear 'im fart."

"I plan to eat that bird in a peppercorn sauce," Brad told the senator, fed up with the senator's poor shooting, the stock of his shotgun hiding his sneer.

Tracking just ahead of the pheasant's flight, he raised his barrels ever so slightly and squeezed the trigger. Shouldering his Beretta he watched for a tumble or at least a faltered flight. Nothing. But then the bird turned sharply skyward, perpendicular to the ground, as if launched at the sun.

"Bully for you!" the CEO cried out. "A heart shot."

"Whuh-zat?" the senator asked.

"Brad stung that pecker with a single bb, right in the ol' ticker. Not enough to knock him out, but he knows he's in trouble." He pointed off. "Look there."

The pheasant had climbed forty or fifty feet, but was plummeting now, with one wing tucked at its side and the other wing flailing above it like the tail of a doomed kite. It fell to earth with a dull thump.

"Instinct," the CEO explained. "A last-ditch effort to stay aloft. They'll do it every time. Fly like the hounds of hell are on their ass, until their heart pumps dry."

The senator elbowed Brad, grinning. "In humans we call that denial."

Everybody laughed. Even the dogs were smiling.

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In humans we call that—

A hand landed on Brad's forearm. His mother's, he saw. He looked into her gaze. Her head canted, her sad eyes brimming with affectionate questions. It was his turn to stand up and say a few words. He swung left to look up at his father, who was glowering down at him with a cemented smile. Pushing to his feet, Brad looked out among the expectant faces, the silk cravats, the necks draped with pearls. Along the back wall, the household staff stood with their hands crossed, making Vs of their arms, their stares full of whispers they didn't dare share. Brad thumbed back the drape of his suit, fingered the gold chain that led to his grandfather's watch in his vest pocket, waiting for the words to come, urging the words to come, fumbling with where to begin. . . until from his left his father hissed under his breath, "Remember the fuck who you are."

Michael Conn studied Literature and Economics at Michigan State University. His stories have been published in several literary journals and quarterlies, and he was twice a finalist for the William Faulkner-William Wisdom Award.