

REQUEST

R I C H A R D S C H R E C K

This excerpt is from the author's novel Brain Game.

I WAS PRESENT AT THE DEATH OF A MAN NAMED EDGAR STEIN.

I was driving back to New Orleans, just over the Tennessee-Mississippi line, listening to Bud Powell's classic jazz piano playing Blue Pearl. My ancient van was holding its own in a tight line of speed-limit traffic when a tractor-trailer up ahead began drifting left and then slid sideways so it blocked both lanes. When it started rolling over, I jerked my hands hard right on the wheel to get myself out of the pile-up. There was no chance. The pickup behind me slammed into my rear bumper and pushed me violently forward into the RV ahead.

There was a loud crash, metal twisting against metal, and everything went dark.

I tried to pull myself back into consciousness. It seemed to take an eternity. Finally managing to climb out of my vehicle and stumbling a few steps, I turned back to look. The front end of my van was significantly shortened, with steam rolling up thick enough to hide the RV it had smashed into. My mind was blurry, but it felt important to move away. I started to make my way along the line of wreckage, the scent of burning tires inescapable. Lucky to be alive. Aware enough to know it.

"What's your name?"

I turned to face the stranger who had taken my arm. "Gilbert." It was a name I hadn't answered to since childhood and had hated it even then.

The stranger sat me down on some damp grass next to an old man in a good suit and told me to stay put.

The man in the good suit was lying back on a slope looking at me with

what I perceived to be dazed interest. He was thin. The hair on his head was in disarray and provided immediate insight into what he would have been without his tailor. But he did have the tailor, and the suit won out.

He raised himself onto one elbow and began to speak as if I were a confidant. Or maybe a priest.

I've never been able to remember everything he said. The accident had left me confused and only partly able to follow his recitation. Plus, I had no context for much of what he was saying.

From what I could glean, he was a child of the Delta made good and returning home on family business. His life, he believed, had been one of intent and achievement. He said something about treating one of his employees poorly, and he appeared to repent of it. Something about having saddled her with young people wearing gaming helmets roaming the streets of Baltimore.

I remember thinking I had misunderstood him. "Gaming? Out on the streets?"

He nodded. "They're disguised."

"The people?"

He looked confused. "No. The head gear."

My mind, trained to analyze security threats and especially opportunities, began to create a list of uses for undetectable headgear, nefarious and otherwise.

I struggled to make sense of it.

He reached into his suit coat and lifted out a deep brown leather wallet, holding it out to me until I received it. From another pocket, he retrieved a ring of keys and put them out to me as well.

Finally, he extracted a leather business card holder, pulled out one of the cards, and placed it face down on the holder. He handed them over to me along with an expensive-looking fountain pen. "Write this down."

I balanced the card case on my knee as he dictated, "Emotion compromises calibration."

It made no sense, and when I paused, he said, "Just write it. *Emotion compromises calibration*. He'll figure it out." When I finished, he reached out for the card and examined what I'd written. He seemed a careful person, one accustomed to following up and attending to the details.

He handed back the card. "If I die, show that to Adamski."

I scribbled, "Adamski."

"If I live, you've no need to remember any of this." Trusting me to remain silent reinforced the idea that he thought me a priest.

He paused and gave me a hard look. "I don't want my law firm involved in this in any way." There was something about the inflection in his voice. It sounded like a warning, not an instruction.

He took the pen back and repeated his directive, this time as a request. "Please see that . . ." His voice faltered. ". . . Adamski gets that." He nodded toward the wallet. "That should cover any expenses you might have. Keep the rest for your trouble."

The last effort seemed one bridge too far for him. He looked suddenly weak, and I remember thinking that he had exhausted his resources giving me my charge. He lay back and I sat quietly beside him, surveying the wreckage and the flashing red lights far in the distance.

When I looked again, he had rolled over and passed out.

I leaned over toward him, waved my hand in front of his eyes, checked for a pulse in his neck. Nothing. But I wasn't at my best.

I looked around. There were others sitting along the grassy slope, but no one else was nearby except one other man facing away from us, talking softly to himself. I thought someone ought to give both him and my companion some attention. Then the other man lay back on the grass, and he too went silent.

I picked up the leather wallet and opened it. My swift and thorough inventory of the contents was force of a habit long abandoned but, in my fuzziness, recalled from some deep place. He had the usual identification, which told me his name was Stein, along with credit cards and about a thousand dollars. Except for the amount of cash, there was nothing out of the ordinary.

Knowing nothing about him and lacking any insight into what his message could mean, I reached over and placed the wallet back into the inside pocket of his suit coat, all its contents intact. I needed to know more. The fact that I had offered up my name as Gilbert underscored my haziness and that I should avoid making any decisions just yet. Stein's thousand dollars was no inducement at all. I might still decide to act on his request, but if I kept the money, I'd feel an obligation that I was unwilling to accept. Memories of past unfortunate decisions lingered.

The business card with my writing on it was still in my hand. Wanting to restore some sort of order, I slid it back into his leather business card holder, counting. Third one down.

I often count things. It helps me to see patterns. I'm an analyst after all.

I slipped his card holder into my own pocket along with his keys, which had fallen onto the wet grass.

It felt right to have the business card holder with the message inside. I don't know why I kept the keys.

* * *

The doctor stood over me. "You've had a blow to the head and you've got a concussion. We're going to keep you here with us for a few days so we can monitor you." He consulted what I supposed was my chart. "It says here you have confusion and memory loss."

I nodded. "I remember." I wasn't trying to be funny, and I appreciated that he didn't laugh. "How long could this last?"

"We hope your symptoms will be gone in a few days. It might be a week or longer. There is something called 'post-concussion syndrome,' where the symptoms last longer than six weeks. It's unusual, but it's not outside the range of possibility. As you work through this, you can still expect to find there are things you can't remember and you'll probably still have periods of confusion. All that would be normal." He stopped talking for a moment, and I suspected he was trying to read my reaction. "How do you feel right now?"

I told him the truth. "Fuzzy."

"Okay." He offered no objection to the colloquial terminology. "Someone will be in later to check on you."

When he was gone, I realized I should have asked if Marta had been notified. She was my emergency contact, a quick enough thinker to provide cover if needed. Also, she was taking care of my cat.

As promised, someone did come in later to check on me, and I asked for my effects. My cell was in the bottom of the plastic bag.

"I was in a pile-up south of Memphis. Some of the doctors are holding me for observation."

"How are you feeling?" Marta got straight to the point.

I couldn't think what to tell her. It was all I could do to focus.

She waited.

"Fuzzy. Confusion and memory loss. But the doctor said it should pass."

She did her best to pull more information out of me and then, probably to judge my level of coherence, she attempted to engage me in idle chatter,

but with limited success. Finally, she asked, “Have you heard about Edgar Stein?”

I was beginning to drift off and didn’t have the energy to respond. But I did recognize it was Stein’s death that had been the biggest news item on the hospital TV blaring from the wall in my room. She tried a couple other topics, then said she would check back again the next day.

It couldn’t have been more than ten seconds after we hung up that it sunk in.

I had been present at the death of Edgar Stein.

The television news reports had been hammering the same few facts. That he had been cited in multiple lists as one of the richest people in the country. That he was notoriously private.

But the reports failed to delve further. Realizing whom I had encountered pulled me up out of my fog. Using my cell, I tried a deep internet dive. It showed him to have been a black hole into which money was inexorably drawn and from which none, or so it appeared, could hope to escape. And that his affairs were in the hands of Battersea, Welch, & Connor, an old and blackened firm whose roots traced to the eighteenth century where they dissolved unappealingly into rumor.

The search, intriguing as it was, exhausted me, but as I slipped the plastic bag containing my effects under my blanket tight against my side, I began to give serious thought to running the errand Stein had tried to send me on. Maybe bringing in Marta.

Maybe we could get something out of it.

For the past few years, I had been making my living by putting together bits of information that were just sitting around out in the open, not necessarily important by themselves but, in combination with other bits of information, quite valuable.

Nothing illegal. To Marta’s occasional frustration.

I drifted off to sleep with the thought that if one of the richest men in the country had asked me to take a dying message to somebody named Adamski, who was I to say no? Stein had invited me in. He had asked me to deliver the message, but he hadn’t told me how much or how long I could look around in the process. I could use that.

It was particularly intriguing that Stein had told me to keep all of this from his law firm, a condition I had not agreed to. Early the next day, as it happened, his law firm sent someone to see me in the hospital. He was a

youngster named Mush, or perhaps Marsh; I couldn't tell in my haze. He introduced himself simply as representing Mr. Edgar Stein's legal interests. I thought him strange.

My mind had been going in and out, and he showed up when it was mostly out. His attempt at conversation must have been unproductive because he promised to return at a more useful time. He had known, which meant that Battersea, Welch, and Connor must have known, that Stein had been found in my company, the two of us together in the shadow of an overturned vehicle.

* * *

It was a relief to finally settle back into my own place. The doctors had given me instructions for changing the bandages on my head and for managing my recurring vertigo. Walking was physically painful, and my dizziness didn't help, so I mostly tried to stay still. Half the time, I couldn't think straight. Other times, I was fine. I made the best use I could of the better times.

As was usual whenever I was on the road, Marta had been coming by to feed my cat Guilfoil. She enjoys interacting with him, but she's not someone who would take on that level of full-time responsibility. She has her own life to lead and, despite her concern for me, it seemed that she was ready to get back to it. I hoped my situation wouldn't inconvenience her too much longer.

The day after my return home, Mush reappeared. He introduced himself to Marta as she was leaving with my scrawled and poorly thought out grocery list. I had not spoken with her about Stein's message and the possibility of us getting something out of it, but I could see in her face that she suspected potential opportunity in Mush as she turned at the door to give me a questioning look. Over the years, I had learned to pay attention when someone pinged Marta's radar. Of the two of us, she was the better at reading people.

Marta's interest coincided with my own intentions. I was already keen to get Mush to spill something about his employers, since Stein had been firm about keeping them out of the loop. And here was Mush showing up for no good reason that I could see, other than to get information out of me instead. I wished my head were clearer as I sat on my sofa, impatient with myself for feeling like an invalid.

Noting my immobility, Mush made an effort to ingratiate himself that I found annoying. “Can I get you anything?”

“Club soda. Lemon and no ice.” I hadn’t intended the snark, it just slipped out.

Guilfoil looked me over and arched his back to be petted. Mush brought me my drink. It was tap water.

“When you were with Mr. Stein, did he give you . . .” Mush faded into a blur and must have let himself out.

Guilfoil is a good cat to have at the end of the world. He can be left to his own devices, but when his friends reappear, he shines. When he was with me, it was easier to focus.

Mush returned the next day and the days after that. “Trying to be helpful,” he said. “Mr. Stein would have wanted us to look out for you.” He brought me things. He offered to put in a servant, but I was against it. He continued to ask if Stein had given me anything, if I had talked with Stein at any great length, and, if so, what Stein might have said. I had been observed, he said, in apparent conversation with Stein. “Are you sure he didn’t give you anything?” Mush was persistent. He had an interest.

I was keeping Mush on the hook to see if he would let slip something I could use. He asked if I would speak with one of Stein’s colleagues, to see if that would jog my memory. It seemed a way to get information, and I smiled politely and said sure.

* * *

We drove through the streets of St. Bernard Parish. Katrina lingered in memory. Insurance companies had said they wouldn’t insure some areas any more. In the post-insurance world, Mush looked out through the windshield and ignored me. I read the numbers on the houses.

Mush turned to me. “Mr. Stein was developing gaming helmets. Do you know what those are?”

“Headgear. They read your brain waves, and you can control a computer game with your mind.”

I thought that perhaps Mush had asked me this before and that perhaps I had been unresponsive, which would explain his having asked me again. Or perhaps he wanted to see whether my answer would change as my mind became less blurry. I withheld judgment.

Mush probed. "His company was called Brain Game. Did he mention it to you?"

"I don't think so." That was true. I didn't remember the name.

It seemed necessary to add, "They don't work very well."

I meant that gaming helmets tended not to work as well as people wanted them to. Stein hadn't mentioned them not working well. Instead, I knew of such things from attempts by friends and enemies to develop military applications. And from some other arenas.

Military applications were a very different thing.

From gaming.

For some reason, I wondered whether Stein's helmets worked better. I just had that feeling, but resisted the temptation to ask.

Mush interrupted my thoughts. "Did he mention Baltimore?"

"No." It wasn't true, of course. Stein had mentioned both gaming helmets and Baltimore. Young people wearing gaming helmets roaming the streets. As he had said, *disguised*.

The gaming helmets. Not the young people.

My mind went again to reasons you would disguise something. Threats and opportunities.

What you would do with gaming helmets out on the street.

If they actually worked.

Mush turned the car toward the curb.

We walked through tall grass toward the door. Bugs jumped.

The woman who opened the door knew Mush. She was holding a gun in her hand, casually, as if she had forgotten it was dangling loosely from her fingers. Not between two fingers, but just casually, as if it were the usual thing. Mush showed only tenuous interest. He complemented her on it, called it an Adams something. It was large.

She stood back so we could go in. Mush went first.

"This is the gentleman who was with Mr. Stein when he died." The woman told me hello.

"I don't know him." Mush nodded but showed no inclination to leave.

"I don't know him."

"You're sure?" Mush was willing to wait. "Take your time."

"I don't."

The woman placed the revolver on a nearby table. She impressed me as eccentric, an impression based on my old life, when that sort of thing, ec-

centricity and its possible ramifications, had to be noted and taken as a signal of consequence. Especially when paired with an apparently casual firearm. Marta would have noted this and made something useful of it. For a moment, I regretted that she was not there to help size things up.

I looked around. Like my own home, the furnishings were inexpensive and few, easy to replace or abandon.

I made an attempt to be cordial. "You have a lovely home here."

"Thanks."

To Mush, "I don't know him."

"Well, then that's that." Mush stood up and I stood with him. The woman sat watching us as we went through the room toward the door. She finally got up and came after us.

Mush turned to me. "I think that you've no need to see me again." He led the way back through the tall grass toward his car. "I'll drop you at home."

"Thanks." I slid into the passenger seat.

Mush and I could have been at an end if I had let it drop there. But I couldn't help myself. There was too much curiosity and potential for gain. Later, the street name was beyond my recall, but it didn't matter because I had the house number and images of adjacent yards. I didn't know it then, but returning would almost guarantee that Mush and I would cross paths again.

Out of habit, I looked south toward the Gulf.

THE END