I am alone in the dark, turning the world around in my head as I struggle through another bout of insomnia, another white night in the great American wilderness. Upstairs, my daughter and granddaughter are asleep in their bedrooms, each one alone as well, the forty-seven-year-old Miriam, my only child, who has slept alone for the past five years, and the twenty-three-year-old Katya, Miriam's only child, who used to sleep with a young man named Titus Small, but Titus is dead now, and Katya sleeps alone with her broken heart.

Bright light, then darkness. Sun pouring down from all corners of the sky, followed by the black of night, the silent stars, the wind stirring in the branches. Such is the routine. I have been living in this house for more than a year now, ever since they released me from the hospital. Miriam insisted that I come here, and at first it was just the two of us, along with a day nurse who looked after me when Miriam was off at work. Then, three months later, the roof fell in on Katya, and she dropped out of film school in New York and came home to live with her mother in Vermont.

His parents named him after Rembrandt's son, the little boy of the paintings, the golden-haired child in the red hat, the day-dreaming pupil puzzling over his lessons, the little boy who turned into a young man ravaged by illness and who died in his twenties, just, as Katya's Titus did. It's a doomed name, a name that should be banned from circulation forever. I think about Titus's death often, the horrifying story of that death, the images of that death, the pulverizing consequences of that death on my grieving granddaughter, but I don't want to go there now, I can't go there now, I have to push it as far away from me as possible. The night is still young, and as I lie here in bed looking up into the darkness, a darkness so black that the ceiling is invisible, I begin to remember the story I started last night. That's what I do when sleep refuses to come. I lie in bed and tell myself stories. They might not add up to much, but as long as I'm inside them, they prevent me from thinking about the things I would prefer to forget. Concentration can be a problem, however, and more often than not my mind eventually drifts away from the story I'm trying to tell to the things I don't want to think about. There's nothing to be done. I fail again and again, fail more often than I succeed, but that doesn't mean I don't give it my best effort.

I put him in a hole. That felt like a good start, a promising way to get things going. Put a sleeping man in a hole, and then see what happens when he wakes up and tries to crawl out. I'm talking about a deep hole in the ground, nine or ten feet deep, dug in such a way as to form a perfect circle, with sheer inner walls of dense, tightly packed earth, so hard that the surfaces have the texture of baked clay, perhaps even glass. In other words, the man in the hole will be unable to extricate himself from the hole once he opens his eyes. Unless he is equipped with a set of mountaineering tools -- a hammer and metal spikes, for example, or a rope to lasso a neighboring tree--but this man has no tools, and once he regains consciousness, he will quickly understand the nature of his predicament.

And so it happens. The man comes to his senses and discovers that he is lying on his back, gazing up at a cloudless evening sky. His name is Owen Brick, and he has no idea how he has landed in this spot, no memory of having fallen into this cylindrical hole, which he estimates to be approximately twelve feet in diameter. He sits up. To his surprise, he is dressed in a soldier's uniform made of rough, dun-colored wool. A cap is on his head, and a pair of sturdy, well-worn black leather boots are on his feet, laced above the ankles with a firm double knot. There are two military stripes on each sleeve of the jacket, indicating that the uniform belongs to someone with the rank of corporal. That person might be Owen Brick, but the man in the hole, whose name is Owen Brick, cannot recall having served in an army or fought in a war at any time in his life.

For want of any other explanation, he assumes he has received a knock on the head, gazing up at a cloudless evening sky. His name is Owen Brick, and he has no idea how he has landed in this spot, no memory of having fallen into this cylindrical hole, which he estimates to be approximately twelve feet in diameter. He sits up. To his surprise, he is dressed in a soldier's uniform made of rough, dun-colored wool. A cap is on his head, and a pair of sturdy, well-worn black leather boots are on his feet, laced above the ankles with a firm double knot. There are two military stripes on each sleeve of the jacket, indicating that the uniform belongs to someone with the rank of corporal. That person might be Owen Brick, but the man in the hole, whose name is Owen Brick, cannot recall having served in an army or fought in a war at any time in his life.
his brain? Perhaps. But unless the memory of that trauma suddenly returns to him, he will have no way of knowing. After that, he begins to explore the possibility that he is asleep in his bed at home, trapped inside some supernaturally lucid dream, a dream so lifelike and intense that the boundary between dreaming and consciousness has all but melted away. If that is true, then he simply has to open his eyes, hop out of bed, and walk into the kitchen to prepare the morning coffee. But how can you open your eyes when they’re already open? He blinks a few times, childishly wondering if that won't break the spell--but there is no spell to be broken, and the magic bed fails to materialize.

A flock of starlings passes overhead, entering his field of vision for five or six seconds, and then vanishes into the twilight. Brick stands up to inspect his surroundings, and as he does so he becomes aware of an object bulging in the left front pocket of his trousers. It turns out to be a wallet, his wallet, and in addition to seventy-six dollars in American money, it contains a driver’s license issued by the state of New York to one Owen Brick, born June 12, 1977. This confirms what Brick already knows: that he is a man approaching thirty who lives in Jackson Heights, Queens. He also knows that he is married to a woman named Flora and that for the past seven years he has worked as a professional magician, performing mostly at children's birthday parties around the city under the stage name of the Great Zavello. These facts only deepen the mystery. If he is so certain of who he is, then how did he wind up at the bottom of this hole dressed in a corporal's uniform no less, without papers or dog_tags or a military ID card to prove his status as a soldier?

It doesn't take long for him to understand that escape is out of the question. The circular wall is too high, and when he kicks it with his boot in order to dent the surface and create some kind of foothold that would help him climb up, the only result is a sore big toe. Night is falling rapidly, and there is a chill in the air, a damp vernal chill worming itself into his body, and while Brick has begun to feel afraid, for the moment he is still more baffled than afraid. Nevertheless, he can't stop himself from calling out for help. Until now, all has been quiet around him, suggesting that he is in some remote, unpopulated stretch of countryside, with no sounds other than an occasional bird cry and the rustling of the wind. As if on command, however, as if by some skewed logic of cause and effect, the moment he shouts the word HELP, artillery fire erupts in the distance, and the darkening sky lights up with streaking comets of destruction. Brick hears machine guns, exploding grenades, and under it all, no doubt miles away, a dull chorus of howling human voices. This is war, he realizes, and he is a soldier in that war, but with no weapon at his disposal, no way to defend himself against attack, and for the first time since waking up in the hole, he is well and truly afraid.

The shooting goes on for more than an hour, then gradually dissipates into silence. Not long after that, Brick hears the faint sound of sirens, which he takes to mean that fire engines are rushing to buildings damaged during the assault. Then the sirens stop as well, and quiet descends on him once again. Cold and frightened as he is, Brick is also exhausted, and after pacing around the confines of his cylindrical jail until the stars appear in the sky, he stretches out on the ground and manages to fall asleep at last.

Early the next morning, he is woken by a voice calling to him from the top of the hole. Brick looks up and sees the face of a man jutting over the rim, and since the face is all he can see, he assumes the man is lying flat on his stomach.

Corporal, the man says. Corporal Brick, it's time to get moving.

Brick stands up, and now that his eyes are only three or four feet from the stranger's face, he can see that the man is a swarthy, square-jawed fellow with a two-day stubble of beard and that he is wearing a military cap identical to the one on his own head. Before Brick can protest that much as he'd like to get moving, he's in no position to do anything of the sort, the man's face disappears.
Don't worry, he hears him say. We'll have you out of there in no time.

Some moments later, there follows the sound of a hammer or iron mallet pounding on a metal object, and because the sound becomes increasingly muted with each successive blow, Brick wonders if the man isn't driving a stake into the ground. And if it's a stake, then perhaps a length of rope will soon be attached to it, and with that rope Brick will be able to climb out of the hole. The clanging stops, another thirty or forty seconds go by, and then, just as he predicted, a rope drops down at his feet.

Brick is a magician, not a body-builder, and even if climbing a yard or so of rope is not an inordinately strenuous task for a healthy man of thirty, he nevertheless has a good deal of trouble hoisting himself to the top. The wall is of no use to him, since the soles of his boots keep sliding off the smooth surface, and when he tries to clamp his boots onto the rope itself, he fails to gain a secure purchase, which means that he has to rely on the strength of his arms alone, and given that his are not muscular or powerful arms, and given that the rope is made of coarse material and therefore chafes his palms, this simple operation is turned into something of a battle. When he finally nears the rim and the other man takes hold of his right hand and pulls him onto level ground, Brick is both out of breath and disgusted with himself. After such a dismal performance, he is expecting to be mocked for his ineptitude, but by some miracle the man refrains from making any disparaging comments. As Brick struggles slowly to his feet, he notes that his rescuer's uniform is the same as his, with the single exception that there are three stripes on the sleeves of his jacket, not two.

The air is dense with fog, and he has difficulty making out where he is. Some isolated spot in the country, as he suspected, but the city or town that was under attack last night is nowhere to be seen. The only things he can distinguish with any clarity are the metal stake with the rope tied around it and a mud-splattered jeep parked about ten feet from the edge of the hole.

Corporal, the man says, shaking Brick's hand with a firm, enthusiastic grip. I'm Serge Tobak, your sergeant. Better known as Sarge Serge.

Brick looks down at the man, who is a good six inches shorter than he is, and repeats the name in a low voice: Sarge Serge.

I know, Tobak says. Very funny. But the name stuck, and there's nothing I can do about it. If you can't lick 'em, join 'em, right?

What am I doing here? Brick asks, trying to suppress the anguish in his voice.

Get a grip on yourself, boy. You're fighting a war. What did you think this was? A trip to Fun World?

What war? Does that mean we're in Iraq?
Iraq? Who cares about Iraq?

America's fighting a war in Iraq. Everyone knows that.

Fuck Iraq. This is America, and America is fighting America.

What are you talking about?

Civil war, Brick. Don't you know anything? This is the fourth year. But now that you've turned up, it's going to end soon. You're the guy who's going to make it happen.

How do you know my name?

You're in my platoon, dumbbell.

And what about the hole? What was I doing down there?

Normal procedure. All new recruits come to us like that.

But I didn't sign up. I didn't enlist.

Of course not. No one does. But that's the way it is. One minute you're living your life, and the next minute you're in the war.

Brick is so confounded by Tobak's statements, he doesn't know what to say.

It's like this, the sergeant rattles on. You're the chump they've picked for the big job. Don't ask me why, but the general staff thinks you're the best man for the assignment. Maybe because no one knows you, or maybe because you have this—this what?...this bland look about you, and no one would suspect you're an assassin.

Assassin?

That's it, assassin. But I like to use the liberator. Or maker of the peace. Whatever you want to call it,
without you the war will never end.

Brick would like to run away on the spot, but because he's unarmed, he can't think of anything else to do but play along. And who am I supposed to kill? he asks.

It's not who so much as what, the sergeant replies enigmatically. We're not even sure of his name. It could be Blake. It could be Black. It could be Bloch. But we have an address, and if he hasn't slipped away by now, you shouldn't have any trouble. We'll set you up with a contact in the city, you'll go undercover, and in a few days it should all be over.

And why does this man deserve to die?

Because he owns the war. He invented it, and everything that happens or is about to happen is in his head. Eliminate that head, and the war stops. It's that simple.

Simple? You make him sound like God.

Not God, Corporal, just a man. He sits in a room all day writing it down, and whatever he writes comes true.

The intelligence reports say he's racked with guilt, but he can't stop himself. If the bastard had the guts to blow his brains out, we wouldn't be having this conversation.

You're saying it's a story, that a man is writing a story, and we're all part of it.

Something like that.

And after he's killed, then what? The war ends, but what about us?

Everything goes back to normal.

Or maybe we just disappear.

Maybe. But that's the risk we have to take. Do or die, son. More than thirteen million dead already. If things go on like this much longer, half the population will be gone before you know it.
Brick has no intention of killing anyone, and the longer he listens to Tobak, the more certain he becomes that the man is a raving lunatic. For the time being, however, he has no choice but to pretend to understand, to act as if he's eager to carry out the assignment.

Sarge Serge walks over to the jeep, fetches a bulging plastic bag from the back, and hands it to Brick. Your new duds, he says, and right there in the open he instructs the magician to strip off his army uniform and put on the civilian clothes contained in the bag: a pair of black jeans, a blue oxford shirt, a red V-neck sweater, a belt, a brown leather jacket, and black leather shoes. Then he hands him a green nylon backpack filled with more clothes, shaving equipment, a toothbrush and toothpaste, a hairbrush, a .38-caliber revolver, and a box of bullets. Finally, Brick is given an envelope with twenty fifty-dollar bills in it and a slip of paper with the name and address of his contact.

Lou Frisk, the sergeant says. A good man. Go to him as soon as you get to the city, and he'll tell you everything you need to know.

What city are we talking about? Brick asks. I have no idea where I am.

Wellington, Tobak says, swiveling to his right and pointing into the heavy morning fog. Twelve miles due north. Just stay on this road, and you'll be there by the middle of the afternoon.

I'm supposed to walk?

Sorry. I'd give you a lift, but I have to go in the other direction. My men are waiting for me.

And what about breakfast? Twelve miles on an empty stomach...

Sorry about that, too. I was supposed to bring you an egg sandwich and a thermos of coffee, but I forgot.

Before leaving to join his men, Sarge Serge pulls the rope up from the hole, yanks the metal stake out of the ground, and tosses them into the back of the jeep. Then he climbs in behind the steering wheel and starts the engine. Giving Brick a farewell salute, he says: Hang in there, soldier. You don't look like much of a killer to me, but what do I know? I'm never right about anything.

Without another word, Tobak presses his foot on the accelerator, and just like that he is gone, disappearing into the fog within a matter of seconds. Brick doesn't budge. He is both cold and hungry, both destabilized and frightened, and for more than a minute he just stands there in the middle of the road, wondering what to do next. Eventually, he starts to shiver in the frosty air. That decides it for him. He has to get his limbs moving, to warm himself up, and so, without the faintest notion of what lies ahead of him, he turns around, thrusts his hands into his pockets, and begins walking toward the city.