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Author: James Blish

Illustrator: H. R. Van Dongen

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ONE-SHOT ***



ONE-SHOT

*You can do a great deal if
you have enough data, and
enough time to compute
on it, by logical methods.
But given the situation
that neither data nor time
is adequate, and an
answer must be produced
... what do you do?*

BY JAMES BLISH

Illustrated by van Dongen

On the day that the Polish freighter *Ludmilla* laid an egg in New York harbor, Abner Longmans ("One-Shot") Braun was in the city going about his normal business, which was making another million dollars. As we found out later, almost nothing else was normal about that particular week end for Braun. For one thing, he had brought his family with him—a complete departure from routine—reflecting the unprecedentedly legitimate nature of the deals he was trying to make. From every point of view it was a bad week end for the CIA to mix into his affairs, but nobody had explained that to the master of the *Ludmilla*.

I had better add here that we knew nothing about this until afterward; from the point of view of the storyteller, an organization like Civilian Intelligence Associates gets to all its facts backwards, entering the tale at the pay-off, working back to the hook, and winding up with a sheaf of background facts to feed into the computer for Next Time. It's rough on the various people who've tried to fictionalize what we do—particularly for the lazy examples of the breed, who come to us expecting that their plotting has already been done for them—but it's inherent in the way we operate, and there it is.

Certainly nobody at CIA so much as thought of Braun when the news first came through. Harry Anderton, the Harbor Defense chief, called us at 0830 Friday to take on the job of identifying the egg; this was when our records show us officially entering the affair, but, of course, Anderton had been keeping the wires to Washington steaming for an hour before that, getting authorization to spend some of his money on us (our clearance status was then and is now C&R—clean and routine).

I was in the central office when the call came through, and had some difficulty in making out precisely what Anderton wanted of us. "Slow down, Colonel Anderton, please," I begged him. "Two or three seconds won't make that much difference. How did you find out about this egg in the first place?"

"The automatic compartment bulkheads on the *Ludmilla* were defective," he said. "It seems that this egg was buried among a lot of other crates in the dump-cell of the hold—"

"What's a dump cell?"

"It's a sea lock for getting rid of dangerous cargo. The bottom of it opens right to Davy Jones. Standard fitting for ships carrying explosives, radioactives, anything that might act up unexpectedly."

"All right," I said. "Go ahead."

"Well, there was a timer on the dump-cell floor, set to drop the egg when the ship came up the river. That worked fine, but the automatic bulkheads that are supposed to keep the rest of the ship from being flooded while the cell's open, didn't. At least they didn't do a thorough job. The *Ludmilla* began to list and the captain yelled for help. When the Harbor Patrol found the dump-cell open, they called us in."

"I see." I thought about it a moment. "In other words, you don't know whether the *Ludmilla* really laid an egg or not."

"That's what I keep trying to explain to you, Dr. Harris. We don't know what she dropped and we haven't any way of finding out. It could be a bomb—it could be anything. We're sweating everybody on board the ship now, but it's my guess that none of them know anything; the whole procedure was designed to be automatic."

"All right, we'll take it," I said. "You've got divers down?"

"Sure, but—"

"We'll worry about the butts from here on. Get us a direct line from your barge to the big board here so we can direct the work. Better get on over here yourself."

"Right." He sounded relieved. Official people have a lot of confidence in CIA; too much, in my estimation. Some day the job will come along that we can't handle, and then Washington will be kicking itself—or, more likely, some scapegoat—for having failed to develop a comparable government department.

Not that there was much prospect of Washington's doing that. Official thinking had been running in the other direction for years. The precedent was the Associated Universities organization which ran Brookhaven; CIA had been started the same way, by a loose corporation of universities and industries all of which had wanted to own an ULTIMAC and no one of which had had the money to buy one for itself. The Eisenhower administration, with its emphasis on private enterprise and concomitant reluctance to sink federal funds into projects of such size, had turned the two examples into a nice fat trend, which ULTIMAC herself said wasn't going to be reversed within the practicable lifetime of CIA.

I buzzed for two staffers, and in five minutes got Clark Cheyney and Joan Hadamard, CIA's business manager and social science division chief respectively. The titles were almost solely for the benefit of the T/O—that is, Clark and Joan do serve in those capacities, but said service takes about two per cent of their capacities and their time. I shot them a couple of sentences of

explanation, trusting them to pick up whatever else they needed from the tape, and checked the line to the divers' barge.

It was already open; Anderton had gone to work quickly and with decision once he was sure we were taking on the major question. The television screen lit, but nothing showed on it but murky light, striped with streamers of darkness slowly rising and falling. The audio went *clonck ... oing, oing ... bonk ... oing ...* Underwater noises, shapeless and characterless.

"Hello, out there in the harbor. This is CIA, Harris calling. Come in, please."

"Monig here," the audio said. *Boink ... oing, oing ...*

"Got anything yet?"

"Not a thing, Dr. Harris," Monig said. "You can't see three inches in front of your face down here—it's too silty. We've bumped into a couple of crates, but so far, no egg."

"Keep trying."

Cheyney, looking even more like a bulldog than usual, was setting his stopwatch by one of the eight clocks on ULTIMAC's face. "Want me to take the divers?" he said.

"No, Clark, not yet. I'd rather have Joan do it for the moment." I passed the mike to her. "You'd better run a probability series first."

"Check." He began feeding tape into the integrator's mouth. "What's your angle, Peter?"

"The ship. I want to see how heavily shielded that dump-cell is."

"It isn't shielded at all," Anderton's voice said behind me. I hadn't heard him come in. "But that doesn't prove anything. The egg might have carried sufficient shielding in itself. Or maybe the Commies didn't care whether the crew was exposed or not. Or maybe there isn't any egg."

"All that's possible," I admitted. "But I want to see it, anyhow."

"Have you taken blood tests?" Joan asked Anderton.

"Yes."

"Get the reports through to me, then. I want white-cell counts, differentials, platelet counts, hematocrit and sed rates on every man."

Anderton picked up the phone and I took a firm hold on the doorknob.

"Hey," Anderton said, putting the phone down again. "Are you going to duck out just like that? Remember, Dr. Harris, we've got to evacuate the city first of all! No matter whether it's a real egg or not—we can't take the chance on it's *not* being an egg!"

"Don't move a man until you get a go-ahead from CIA," I said. "For all we know now, evacuating the city may be just what the enemy wants us to do—so they can grab it unharmed. Or they may want to start a panic for some other reason, any one of fifty possible reasons."

"You can't take such a gamble," he said grimly. "There are eight and a half million lives riding on it. I can't let you do it."

"You passed your authority to us when you hired us," I pointed out. "If you want to evacuate without our O.K., you'll have to fire us first. It'll take another hour to get that cleared from Washington—so you might as well give us the hour."

He stared at me for a moment, his lips thinned. Then he picked up the phone again to order Joan's blood count, and I got out the door, fast.

A reasonable man would have said that I found nothing useful on the *Ludmilla*, except negative information. But the fact is that anything I found would have been a surprise to me; I went down looking for surprises. I found nothing but a faint trail to Abner Longmans Braun, most of which was fifteen years cold.

There'd been a time when I'd known Braun, briefly and to no profit to either of us. As an undergraduate majoring in social sciences, I'd taken on a term paper on the old International Longshoreman's Association, a racket-ridden union now formally extinct—although anyone who knew the signs could still pick up some traces on the docks. In those days, Braun had been the business manager of an insurance firm, the sole visible function of which had been to write policies for the ILA and its individual dock-wallopers. For some reason, he had been amused by the brash youngster who'd barged in on him and demanded the lowdown, and had shown me considerable lengths of ropes not normally in view of the public—nothing incriminating, but enough to give me a better insight into how the union operated than I had had any right to expect—or even suspect.

Hence I was surprised to hear somebody on the docks remark that Braun was in the city over the week end. It would never have occurred to me that he still interested himself in the waterfront, for he'd gone respectable with a vengeance. He was still a professional gambler, and according to

what he had told the Congressional Investigating Committee last year, took in thirty to fifty thousand dollars a year at it, but his gambles were no longer concentrated on horses, the numbers, or shady insurance deals. Nowadays what he did was called investment—mostly in real estate; realtors knew him well as the man who had *almost* bought the Empire State Building. (The *almost* in the equation stands for the moment when the shoestring broke.)

Joan had been following his career, too, not because she had ever met him, but because for her he was a type study in the evolution of what she called "the extra-legal ego." "With personalities like that, respectability is a disease," she told me. "There's always an almost-open conflict between the desire to be powerful and the desire to be accepted; your ordinary criminal is a moral imbecile, but people like Braun are damned with a conscience, and sooner or later they crack trying to appease it."

"I'd sooner try to crack a Timkin bearing," I said. "Braun's ten-point steel all the way through."

"Don't you believe it. The symptoms are showing all over him. Now he's backing Broadway plays, sponsoring beginning actresses, joining playwrights' groups—he's the only member of Buskin and Brush who's never written a play, acted in one, or so much as pulled the rope to raise the curtain."

"That's investment," I said. "That's his business."

"Peter, you're only looking at the surface. His real investments almost never fail. But the plays he backs *always* do. They have to; he's sinking money in them to appease his conscience, and if they were to succeed it would double his guilt instead of salving it. It's the same way with the young actresses. He's not sexually interested in them—his type never is, because living a rigidly orthodox family life is part of the effort towards respectability. He's backing them to 'pay his debt to society'—in other words, they're talismans to keep him out of jail."

"It doesn't seem like a very satisfactory substitute."

"Of course it isn't," Joan had said. "The next thing he'll do is go in for direct public service—giving money to hospitals or something like that. You watch."

She had been right; within the year, Braun had announced the founding of an association for clearing the Detroit slum area where he had been born—the plainest kind of symbolic suicide: *Let's not have any more Abner Longmans Brauns born down here*. It depressed me to see it happen, for next on Joan's agenda for Braun was an entry into politics as a fighting liberal—a New Dealer twenty years too late. Since I'm mildly liberal myself when I'm off duty, I hated to think what Braun's career might tell me about my own motives, if I'd let it.

All of which had nothing to do with why I was prowling around the *Ludmilla*—or did it? I kept remembering Anderton's challenge: "You can't take such a gamble. There are eight and a half million lives riding on it—" That put it up into Braun's normal operating area, all right. The connection was still hazy, but on the grounds that any link might be useful, I phoned him.

He remembered me instantly; like most uneducated, power-driven men, he had a memory as good as any machine's.

"You never did send me that paper you was going to write," he said. His voice seemed absolutely unchanged, although he was in his seventies now. "You promised you would."

"Kids don't keep their promises as well as they should," I said. "But I've still got copies and I'll see to it that you get one, this time. Right now I need another favor—something right up your alley."

"CIA business?"

"Yes. I didn't know you knew I was with CIA."

Braun chuckled. "I still know a thing or two," he said. "What's the angle?"

"That I can't tell you over the phone. But it's the biggest gamble there ever was, and I think we need an expert. Can you come down to CIA's central headquarters right away?"

"Yeah, if it's that big. If it ain't, I got lots of business here, Andy. And I ain't going to be in town long. You're sure it's top stuff?"

"My word on it."

He was silent a moment. Then he said, "Andy, send me your paper."

"The paper? Sure, but—" Then I got it. I'd given him my word. "You'll get it," I said. "Thanks, Mr. Braun."

I called headquarters and sent a messenger to my apartment to look for one of those long-dusty blue folders with the legal-length sheets inside them, with orders to scorch it over to Braun without stopping to breathe more than once. Then I went back myself.

The atmosphere had changed. Anderton was sitting by the big desk, clenching his fists and sweating; his whole posture telegraphed his controlled helplessness. Cheyney was bent over a

seismograph, echo-sounding for the egg through the river bottom. If that even had a prayer of working, I knew, he'd have had the trains of the Hudson & Manhattan stopped; their rumbling course through their tubes would have blanked out any possible echo-pip from the egg.

"Wild goose chase?" Joan said, scanning my face.

"Not quite. I've got something, if I can just figure out what it is. Remember One-Shot Braun?"

"Yes. What's he got to do with it?"

"Nothing," I said. "But I want to bring him in. I don't think we'll lick this project before deadline without him."

"What good is a professional gambler on a job like this? He'll just get in the way."

I looked toward the television screen, which now showed an amorphous black mass, jutting up from a foundation of even deeper black. "Is that operation getting you anywhere?"

"Nothing's gotten us anywhere," Anderton interjected harshly. "We don't even know if that's the egg—the whole area is littered with crates. Harris, you've got to let me get that alert out!"

"Clark, how's the time going?"

Cheyney consulted the stopwatch. "Deadline in twenty-nine minutes," he said.

"All right, let's use those minutes. I'm beginning to see this thing a little clearer. Joan, what we've got here is a one-shot gamble; right?"

"In effect," she said cautiously.

"And it's my guess that we're never going to get the answer by diving for it—not in time, anyhow. Remember when the Navy lost a barge-load of shells in the harbor, back in '52? They scabbled for them for a year and never pulled up a one; they finally had to warn the public that if it found anything funny-looking along the shore it shouldn't bang said object, or shake it either. We're better equipped than the Navy was then—but we're working against a deadline."

"If you'd admitted that earlier," Anderton said hoarsely, "we'd have half a million people out of the city by now. Maybe even a million."

"We haven't given up yet, colonel. The point is this, Joan: what we need is an inspired guess. Get anything from the prob series, Clark? I thought not. On a one-shot gamble of this kind, the 'laws' of chance are no good at all. For that matter, the so-called ESP experiments showed us long ago that even the way we construct random tables is full of holes—and that a man with a feeling for the essence of a gamble can make a monkey out of chance almost at will.

"And if there ever was such a man, Braun is it. That's why I asked him to come down here. I want him to look at that lump on the screen and—play a hunch."

"You're out of your mind," Anderton said.



A decorous knock spared me the trouble of having to deny, affirm or ignore the judgment. It was Braun; the messenger had been fast, and the gambler hadn't bothered to read what a college student had thought of him fifteen years ago. He came forward and held out his hand, while the others looked him over frankly.

He was impressive, all right. It would have been hard for a stranger to believe that he was aiming at respectability; to the eye, he was already there. He was tall and spare, and walked perfectly erect, not without spring despite his age. His clothing was as far from that of a gambler as you could have taken it by design: a black double-breasted suit with a thin vertical stripe, a gray silk tie with a pearl stickpin just barely large enough to be visible at all, a black Homburg; all perfectly fitted, all worn with proper casualness—one might almost say a formal casualness. It was only when he opened his mouth that One-Shot Braun was in the suit with him.

"I come over as soon as your runner got to me," he said. "What's the pitch, Andy?"

"Mr. Braun, this is Joan Hadamard, Clark Cheyney, Colonel Anderton. I'll be quick because we need speed now. A Polish ship has dropped something out in the harbor. We don't know what it is. It may be a hell-bomb, or it may be just somebody's old laundry. Obviously we've got to find out which—and we want you to tell us."

Braun's aristocratic eyebrows went up. "Me? Hell, Andy, I don't know nothing about things like that. I'm surprised with you. I thought CIA had all the brains it needed—ain't you got machines to tell you answers like that?"

I pointed silently to Joan, who had gone back to work the moment the introductions were over. She was still on the mike to the divers. She was saying: "What does it look like?"

"It's just a lump of something, Dr. Hadamard. Can't even tell its shape—it's buried too deeply in the mud." *Cloonk ... Oing, oing ...*

"Try the Geiger."

"We did. Nothing but background."

"Scintillation counter?"

"Nothing, Dr. Hadamard. Could be it's shielded."

"Let us do the guessing, Monig. All right, maybe it's got a clockwork fuse that didn't break with the impact. Or a gyroscopic fuse. Stick a stethoscope on it and see if you pick up a ticking or anything that sounds like a motor running."

There was a lag and I turned back to Braun. "As you can see, we're stymied. This is a long shot, Mr. Braun. One throw of the dice—one show-down hand. We've got to have an expert call it for us—somebody with a record of hits on long shots. That's why I called you."

"It's no good," he said. He took off the Homburg, took his handkerchief from his breast pocket, and wiped the hatband. "I can't do it."

"Why not?"

"It ain't my *kind* of thing," he said. "Look, I never in my life run odds on anything that made any difference. But this makes a difference. If I guess wrong—"

"Then we're all dead ducks. But why should you guess wrong? Your hunches have been working for sixty years now."

Braun wiped his face. "No. You don't get it. I wish you'd listen to me. Look, my wife and my kids are in the city. It ain't only my life, it's theirs, too. That's what I care about. That's why it's no good. On things that matter to me, *my hunches don't work*."

I was stunned, and so, I could see, were Joan and Cheyney. I suppose I should have guessed it, but it had never occurred to me.

"Ten minutes," Cheyney said.

I looked up at Braun. He was frightened, and again I was surprised without having any right to be. I tried to keep at least my voice calm.

"Please try it anyhow, Mr. Braun—as a favor. It's already too late to do it any other way. And if you guess wrong, the outcome won't be any worse than if you don't try at all."

"My kids," he whispered. I don't think he knew that he was speaking aloud. I waited.

Then his eyes seemed to come back to the present. "All right," he said. "I told you the truth, Andy. Remember that. So—is it a bomb or ain't it? That's what's up for grabs, right?"

I nodded. He closed his eyes. An unexpected stab of pure fright went down my back. Without the eyes, Braun's face was a death mask.

The water sounds and the irregular ticking of a Geiger counter seemed to spring out from the audio speaker, four times as loud as before. I could even hear the pen of the seismograph scribbling away, until I looked at the instrument and saw that Clark had stopped it, probably long ago.

Droplets of sweat began to form along Braun's forehead and his upper lip. The handkerchief remained crushed in his hand.

Anderton said, "Of all the fool—"

"Hush!" Joan said quietly.

Slowly, Braun opened his eyes. "All right," he said. "You guys wanted it this way. *I say it's a bomb*." He stared at us for a moment more—and then, all at once, the Timkin bearing burst. Words poured out of it. "Now you guys do something, do your job like I did mine—get my wife and kids out of there—empty the city—do something, *do something!*"

Anderton was already grabbing for the phone. "You're right, Mr. Braun. If it isn't already too late —"

Cheyney shot out a hand and caught Anderton's telephone arm by the wrist. "Wait a minute," he said.

"What d'you mean, 'wait a minute'? Haven't you already shot enough time?"

Cheyney did not let go; instead, he looked inquiringly at Joan and said, "One minute, Joan. You might as well go ahead."

She nodded and spoke into the mike. "Monig, unscrew the cap."

"Unscrew the cap?" the audio squawked. "But Dr. Hadamard, if that sets it off—"

"It won't go off. That's the one thing you can be sure it won't do."

"What is this?" Anderton demanded. "And what's this deadline stuff, anyhow?"

"The cap's off," Monig reported. "We're getting plenty of radiation now. Just a minute— Yeah. Dr. Hadamard, it's a bomb, all right. But it hasn't got a fuse. Now how could they have made a fool mistake like that?"

"In other words, it's a dud," Joan said.

"That's right, a dud."

Now, at last, Braun wiped his face, which was quite gray. "I told you the truth," he said grimly. "My hunches don't work on stuff like this."

"But they do," I said. "I'm sorry we put you through the wringer—and you too, colonel—but we couldn't let an opportunity like this slip. It was too good a chance for us to test how our facilities would stand up in a real bomb-drop."

"A real drop?" Anderton said. "Are you trying to say that CIA staged this? You ought to be shot, the whole pack of you!"

"No, not exactly," I said. "The enemy's responsible for the drop, all right. We got word last month from our man in Gdynia that they were going to do it, and that the bomb would be on board the *Ludmilla*. As I say, it was too good an opportunity to miss. We wanted to find out just how long it would take us to figure out the nature of the bomb—which we didn't know in detail—after it was dropped here. So we had our people in Gdynia defuse the thing after it was put on board the ship, but otherwise leave it entirely alone.

"Actually, you see, your hunch was right on the button as far as it went. We didn't ask you whether or not that object was a live bomb. We asked whether it was a bomb or not. You said it was, and you were right."

The expression on Braun's face was exactly like the one he had worn while he had been searching for his decision—except that, since his eyes were open, I could see that it was directed at me. "If this was the old days," he said in an ice-cold voice, "I might of made the colonel's idea come true. I don't go for tricks like this, Andy."

"It was more than a trick," Clark put in. "You'll remember we had a deadline on the test, Mr. Braun. Obviously, in a real drop we wouldn't have all the time in the world to figure out what kind of a thing had been dropped. If we had still failed to establish that when the deadline ran out, we would have had to allow evacuation of the city, with all the attendant risk that that was exactly what the enemy wanted us to do."

"So?"

"So we failed the test," I said. "At one minute short of the deadline, Joan had the divers unscrew the cap. In a real drop that would have resulted in a detonation, if the bomb was real; we'd never risk it. That we did do it in the test was a concession of failure—an admission that our usual methods didn't come through for us in time.

"And that means that you were the only person who did come through, Mr. Braun. If a real bomb-drop ever comes, we're going to have to have you here, as an active part of our investigation. Your intuition for the one-shot gamble was the one thing that bailed us out this time. Next time it may save eight million lives."

There was quite a long silence. All of us, Anderton included, watched Braun intently, but his impassive face failed to show any trace of how his thoughts were running.

When he did speak at last, what he said must have seemed insanely irrelevant to Anderton, and maybe to Cheyney too. And perhaps it meant nothing more to Joan than the final clinical note in a case history.

"It's funny," he said, "I was thinking of running for Congress next year from my district. But maybe this is more important."

It was, I believe, the sigh of a man at peace with himself.



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