

Excerpts—LONG TIME GONE

from Chapter 1

Po Case was lean and rangy, and something about him seemed old before he was old. He cut the fish along its side and lifted, and the slice gleamed gray-white under the lamp. The backs of his hands and forearms were chords and knots, and the mosquitoes refused to land on him because of the years the sun had darkened his skin. Po Case was a quiet man, but I had the feeling when I was twelve that his backhand could send you flying if he ever had that intention.

The sun struck the far bank, and the shadows in the clay looked like old faces. Po had seen every sunrise from the old house. Wayne and I had seen the sunrise there and so had Vernon.

When he couldn't have been more than five or six, Vernon got lost for most of a day in the woods adjoining the Case land. Wayne and I shouted ourselves hoarse when we found him gone because he was Wayne's little brother and our responsibility. It was almost dark when we found him; he had just decided to wander off a while on his own. Wayne was the coolest kid I knew and slow to rage, but I remember him grabbing Vernon by both arms and shaking him until I was sure his red head would disconnect and leave us both with a lot of explaining to do. I had never seen Wayne so mad. It was because he couldn't understand the kid doing that. He didn't know why Vernon would split off and get lost without a trace of common sense.

Now Vernon had lost himself again, and I was probably the only one in Harriet who knew where he was and could do a thing about it. I knew why he left us in the woods that day and I had an idea of why he left now. Vernon was always more like me in some ways than like Wayne. I couldn't say how except that Vernon had been running since the day he was born. We had always expected him to change, the way we expected his carrot-red hair to turn to some everyday color. It never did.

A motorcycle ripped around the corner behind my back, a huge bike, all black. The rider seemed massive. The human and the machine were one, and the slick black form bloomed and vanished. For a moment I only stared at the roadbed that seemed to have been seared by the tire's heat. I stood up on the limb and my chest was pounding as I felt the red morning sun over Harriet full on my face.

I breathed the mist that had started to lift and separate from the air as Po Case was breathing it and the day was taking it away. I was hungry for it and breathed it in even as the sun was stealing it. That mist was nothing but vanishing. Everything was passing in it. This morning, beginning this moment, was leave-taking. Because somehow Vernon had worked his way into the disappearing center and I was preparing to follow him. Hands tingled. Blood tingled. The weeds would grow too high to cut back. Po Case was dying in the house he had made with his hands.

That was why I had packed the suitcase and why when I had sold the car I hadn't told Pearl and why Bob Terry was at the microphone this morning in my place. By Greyhound I could be in New Orleans by afternoon. I was walking on River Road in the mist that clung to the blacktop like skin, and Harriet looked brand new under the rising sun.

from Chapter 6

We were heading toward the ocean. The street seemed to narrow and traffic crept. Filmy beach shirts billowed around the bodies of women in two-piece suits and rubber thong shoes. Aromas of suntan lotion lingered in their wake.

Dipping out of the sky over the ocean, flying low, a white Beachcraft trailed a banner three times its own length: "Jai-Alai at the Fronton Tonight."

"Ever been to a fronton?" Betsy asked. "I bet not. It's a great game. The players come from the islands. It's so fast you can hardly follow it."

"No, but I've heard of it. They play it in a handball court, don't they?"

"That's right, it's like that. And you can hardly keep your eye on the ball. I can't tell what's going on half the time. Those guys—"

Before she could continue, the plane streaked low over the crowd with a roar that drowned the sound of the traffic. Then it was past us and gone. Children's voices bubbled in the crowd. It banked away and straightened course, paralleling the beach.

In the space behind the plane, in a dreamlike coda, a white gull veered over our heads, wings crooked and still, gliding on a current of air. It was followed by another, gliding also, wheeling out of the blue and into the blind sun. I could feel the breeze they were riding. It was steady and struck me full in the face, the light onshore rush. Betsy held her hat with one hand. I listened and

heard, for the first time, on the edge of the breeze, somewhere on the horizon where the wind began, a sound like the rushing echo in a shell held to the ear. And in that echo, the sound of a thousand collapsing waves, separate torrents, continuous, like the ghost of a waterfall. Then we were moving again, side by side along the walk toward the beach.

At the corner of Atlantic and Main, the old Daytona Hotel rose behind us, and across from the hotel, a row of booths and arcades stretched to a ramshackle vanishing point. With a few exceptions, the game booths were closed in the middle of the afternoon, and the chain of arcades lay like a slumbering, vagrant god that presided over the transient place. In the crush of shimmering automobiles and nearly naked bodies steaming, redolent with oil, it sprawled where the pulse of Main Street ended, one eye open on the sea.

from Chapter 18

She was watching the end of the yard where a car was passing in the alley. I noticed the jaw line that accounted for her spunky look. Her lips from the side looked inviting, her throat a bit elongated, as though she could have modeled for Rosetti, but only for miniatures. The face wasn't classically beautiful, but her eyes were so alive, and the subtle upturn at the corners of her mouth made me want to watch her. I had never been attracted to perfectly beautiful faces, ones with every enticing quirk either missing or factored out. The headlights bounded by in the alley. Did she know I was watching?

"My dad is such a gas. You'd like him." She paused a moment. "My mom died when I was eight. That was when my dad left acting in New York. He didn't remarry until my junior year. My sister Elise is two years older. She was already at college when he married Cynthia. If you were generous, you could say our stepmother is statuesque. Also slow on the uptake. We don't exactly have a lot to talk about. But, I suppose she tries."

"I lost my parents pretty young too," I said. She looked at me in that disarming way she had, not at my lips or nose with great conscious concern, but directly into the centers of my eyes so that I felt linked with her and disoriented for a moment.

"Actually, I never knew them. I was an adopted kid."

"I'm sorry."

“No need to be sorry, I assure you. I had a pretty good kidhood.” Her face looked so open. I wanted either to hug her or change the subject.

“What kind of ring is that?” I said.

Her arm was extended along the handrail, and an intricate gold ring caught the kitchen light.

“It’s a claddagh. See, it’s a heart with a crown over it.” She held out her hand with red fingernails, and I saw the heart and the crown.

“You can wear it with the crown in like this or out.” She took her hand back, reversed the ring for demonstration purposes, then reversed it again.

“What’s the significance of the crown?”

“If you wear it out, it means your heart is taken.”

I smiled at her. She looked down into the ring and fingered it self-consciously.

“You feel like dancing?”

She shrugged then nodded okay. We went back through the screen door into the kitchen lights and voices and headed toward the music.

The living room was rocking even louder than before, with fewer dancers. Most of the bodies sat or leaned against the walls, and only five or six were still vertical in the middle of the floor. Behind them smoke hung in the air, flat clouds in the yellow, filtered light from the hallway.

A few steps into the room I nearly tripped over a sudden heap, a hunching figure in ancient denim pants and jacket. He sat cross-legged and seemingly unconscious, chin on chest, dirty long hair in his face.

“That’s Bam,” Bonnie shouted over the music. “He’s a local head who finds parties and drops in uninvited. He comes for the food. Sometimes people let him stay, sometimes not. He’s known as Uncle Bam.”

I spotted an empty plate beside him, shoved under a chair. Even so, it wasn’t such damning evidence, as there were plates abandoned around the room in several unlikely places and plastic cups everywhere, some empty, some half-full of unidentifiable fluids, some stocked with cigarette butts, matches, and assorted ashes.

“He looks like a Zen wino,” I shouted back. The cut that had been playing ended abruptly, and I found myself shouting “wino” in the silence. Uncle Bam carried on undisturbed.

She would never say where she came from...

The music began again. Bonnie and I started dancing, and others joined us. In the darker half of the room, on the sofa, vague outlines of bodies were caressing one another through their clothes. Around the walls shadowy forms were huddling, watching us like refugees or survivors. Bonnie and I had entered the music again and we were out of ourselves. I focused on her silhouette, thick-haired against the lighter walls in the slanted light from the hallway, and I was glad she was there, my partner in the dark, thundering music. In front of Uncle Bam, the vagabond Buddha, we danced, anonymous souls, and the night passed on and on without us.

from Chapter 21

Her forehead smelled clean, like wildflowers. Under the terry cloth, down the smooth slope of her back, it was warm and moist.

As you stare into the vacuum of his eyes

Down the trace of her spine to the small of her back, firm and silky. Her hands around my waist. We were blessed by the light of the city, the light finer than holy water to those who had strayed. One of us let her towel go and she moved to the bed.

Bonnie sat back without turning away, allowing me an open view of her torso, her high breasts that were full as I had imagined, and the slant of her waist. The pink of her nipples diffused into a light blush on her breasts like the skin's discovery of the red in her hair. She tucked under the covers and grinned, not a coy grin but inviting.

I slipped off my shoes and shirt. As I stepped to the bed, the record faded and I found myself standing in an awkward silence. She reached out her hand to me and the covers pulled away from one breast. The small gesture seemed to me remarkably kind. Our breathing was the only sound. Then the next cut began, raucous and driving. She unbuttoned the top of my jeans and unzipped them without faltering.

In the silence between the songs, I had sensed that she was less self-conscious, less wary than I. It was strange, but I expected to see some perfectly ordinary fear in her, almost wanted it, fear of crossing the distance. Her expectations were different, therefore so were her fears. But I was sick of the differences. Just considering them was making me feel old again, standing with my fly open before my eighteen-year-old flame.

Johnny's in the factory he ain't got no shoes.

I'm in the kitchen with the Tombstone Blues.

The record filled the room around us, and it was better than love in silence, conducive, like a thunderstorm.

The skin on her shoulders was pale, nearly white, northern skin dusted with freckles, different from women's shoulders I had known, tinted by sun. Still, they were alike in form and texture, fine shoulders, delicate but firm, light muscles shifting. Not unlike Pearl's shoulders. Women's shoulders not so unlike men's. Providentially, nothing unique in our desires or fears, our bridge across the distance....

I ride a mail train, Babe, can't buy a thrill.

I've been up all night, leaning on the window sill.

Bonnie looked up and nipped my chin. She extracted my hand and shoved one shoulder over until I lay on my back. Then she was slithering down my front like a sly serpent until I felt the surprise of her lips and the warm, moist inside of her mouth. Her hair fell, tousled, a cloudy swirl.

Through the window I saw again the single red light in the distance. It vanished and returned, and as before, I felt an affirmation that we were part of a larger work, two of many at a point of intersection, receiving the benediction of the anonymous city light that presided over all encounters. All is well, said the pulse, the spiritual locus. All is well, said the bells of Rhymney. I settled between the pulse of the light and Bonnie's pulse that drew on me like undertow.

from Chapter 27

Cicadas were starting their long drilling sounds. We jammed the stern into grass, swore, poled out and started over. In the breeze the sawgrass leaned over us, almost touching us with its huge rough fingers. The sound of it was like laughing and sighing. Soon the shadows in the channel were darkening.

"Help!" I stood on the seat in the middle and started yelling. "Help!" I half-expected Wayne to shut me up again. I was hoping he would.

“Help!” he started shouting too and my insides dropped. I hated the fear in his face, it made it so much worse. We shouted and no one answered, no boat motor cruising back from the spring, nothing but the breeze shushing us from the tops of the sawgrass.

When we stopped yelling I had tears in my eyes. Wayne looked at me for a second. He did nothing for a while. Then he put his oar down, turned, and dropped the prop back in the water.

“What are you doing?”

“Sit down a minute,” he said and I could hear how he had gotten quieter inside. I sat down low.

He pulled the handle and the motor caught. Then he backed as far as he could go toward one wall of grass without fouling the prop again and shifted into forward.

Wayne throttled up and we gunned along the narrow shoot to the next fork. He angled left and the bow shot down the channel. He took the next two branches right and there was no way to be sure that he knew where he was going and no way or reason at all to argue about it. The sudden wind in our faces was such a charge of freedom, we had to keep going, and when the prop began to pick up weeds again, I just shouted, “Go!” We were in rare territory, running for our lives, and we had momentum, even if it was out of our hands.

A wall of sawgrass loomed in front of the bow. “Go! Go!” we were both shouting. “Go!”

We jammed straight in, and the grass rushed all around us, lashing our arms, raking every inch of hull like fingernails of corpses clutching up from the swamp. The motor groaned.

“Go! Go!” The prop slowed but we churned forward. “Go!”

The motor died when we broke the ring of grass. Bug Springs channel opened in front of us, broad and lightly rippled by the same breeze. How we had found it neither of us could explain, but I could recall the feeling of Wayne trusting to nothing but instinct and remembering the way before he had a chance to think and choose and forget.

If Wayne had had one chance to break out, why did he take it then and not a dozen years later in that other stinking swamp with the real dead dragging him down? If we had stayed lost until morning then, would he still have had that card to play? I tried not to remember the look on Wayne’s face. “Go!” we had yelled at it then, the haunted face of fear, and it had worked for a while.

from Chapter 28

It was a beautiful day, warm, blue, hazy afternoon, baseball weather. Kids in the streets. Ironic that it should have seemed so much like a real beginning, the beginning of summer. Also, for Bonnie, the real beginning of the election with the California primary and Kennedy taking it, one hundred seventy-four delegate votes.

She called me at work. I could barely get anything out of her. She was crying and talking fast, repeating that she couldn't believe it before she could tell me what it was. At the same time one of our drivers came in with the news, and the TV went on behind the counter. I didn't wait to watch. The night was nearly over and I checked out, then caught the story on the radio on the way home.

She was on the bed sobbing, hugging her knees. I held her and stroked her hair as though to smooth the damage out, but as we watched the TV she cried on, trembling quietly, and I understood it was a hurt beyond comforting.

The replays were in progress, slow-motion recaptures that recalled the ones five years ago, Lee Harvey Oswald and Jack Ruby in their dance of death that looked so staged. But this was L. A. news footage, pock-sounds too real for the microphone, screams and a crowd closing around him.

Kennedy was under the knife in a hospital in the City of Angels and there was no campaign. And an end for a beginning and the fact that whatever psychosis walked up within feet of him resided in a minority body, a Jordanian, disenfranchised, marginalized, the very person for whom Robert Kennedy advocated so eloquently. No irony, only the fact. And no system of choice, only the gun. He was on his back on the floor of the Ambassador Hotel kitchen pantry, right arm outstretched, eyes open to us, a vision frozen out of time that I knew we would carry in our hearts and minds.

By the next day, June sixth, he was dead. The papers were full of the usual exhortations to law and order, weak echoes, the best sentiments of other times.

On the day of the funeral we gathered in our apartment, Peachy and Tom and Ivan and the rest of the committee. On the TV the procession was passing on an avenue in Washington, a crowd-lined black and gray television avenue. Cronkite's voice deep and slow, the caisson

rolling, the word “caisson” again like “sniper,” rare and pounding with echoes. I felt it inside, a black and gray void, illness of spirit, like a disease you couldn’t help but catch sooner or later.

Ivan held his face in his hands. Dick and Frances huddled together. Todd’s face was wet. Bonnie stood behind me against the wall, fingers to her lips.

Through the procession and the funeral itself, I found myself watching their faces. The brightness I remembered in their eyes was a darkness now. It reminded me of a picture I had seen somewhere, on a news report or in some magazine. They were marching, as it seemed they always were. They carried candles, tiny flames but bright, stuck into the tops of Budweiser cans or bottles, or held simply in their hands. What I remembered was a snapshot, the candle light reflected in their eyes for a moment. I tried to reconstruct the picture, but I couldn’t quite. Nevertheless, it was there somewhere in our room, behind the darkness in the eyes.

“Shit!” Aaron spat. Above the measured words of tribute that soothed across the cemetery. “Shit.” He began to cry, and he seemed to be completely alone with it and wanted it that way.

I flashed on another picture, a kid just as alone, an image I had seen on the eleven o’clock news. A boy in a sweater, bulky and oversized, hair long and straight over the turtleneck. Behind him a few white, frail faces, like kids surprising you out of an alley, begging in the night. In front of him shiny black helmets and a level battery of bayonets. He was stuffing the guns with flowers, dandelion stems into the open barrels, and from the set of his jaw two feet from the bayonet points, you could see it wasn’t a game. One by one, flowers from the tips of his fingers into the barrels of the guns. Repeating rifles that could rip a soul away from breath in Hanoi or Saigon or Memphis or Los Angeles. Somewhere outside the Pentagon.

They were so young, in the pictures I remembered and around me in the room. They were haunted by something, not just Bobby Kennedy’s ghost. The mustaches and scruffing beards and the girls’ black-ringed eyes and the hair that curled thickly into ducktails or fell straight on their shoulders only set it in deeper relief—their age, their own moment so fragile, supported as it was, or had been, on a skeleton of hope. A ragged thing haunted them, I was sure, something noble.

from Chapter 35

I may have heard it first under the chant, but I couldn't be sure. Others heard it in the moments that followed although they probably didn't guess the source or the direction. I had seen them arriving and I knew.

It was a dull rumble inside the buses, three of them, then four, parked on the main cross street, Balbo, that intersected Michigan at the Hilton. They were dark buses, or perhaps they just appeared dark, angled to the curb, out of the lights. I wasn't guessing at the source of the sound, it was more like a dim recognition I was trying to deny. In the ensuing moments, as more of us discovered them, a few inside the buses gave it away, waving black sticks in the windows. My hunch had been correct, scores of night sticks pounding a dull roar inside the metal hulls.

"The whole world is watching!" The chant rose out of the crowd with the buses at their backs. The doors were opening.

I glanced at Vernon. He was staring at the buses, eyes wide.

"The whole world is watching!" Oz was tapping his cane, chanting with them. Of the others, the only one I could see was Randy, moving farther into the press of the crowd.

"The whole world—"

It was broken by screams from the street. In front of the cameras sticks were whipping up and down over heads. The front of the crowd had reached the chain of police.

From Balbo they were descending from the buses, pouring in over the grass. They weren't the same police.

"God!" Vernon said, and we grabbed each other.

"Hey!" Oz shouted. I was clamping a vice into his arm.

They were like running death. Their helmets were black or blue with a white star. The chin straps covered half their faces like leather masks. Instead of the white shirts we had seen before, they were long-sleeved and blue or black. We couldn't hear them as they ran, black combat boots throwing tufts of sod. Into their palms they slapped the black sticks, gloves of black leather. More were pouring down the steps of the buses.

"Behind us!" I shouted. Over there!"

The ones around us who turned and saw, stood, dumbstruck for the crucial seconds. The few who had already seen them were ready. One young man took two strides and threw. Others

around him followed. Rocks, bottles, chunks of wood and glass flew at the riot police. Screams pierced like sirens all around us. Demonstrators began scattering away from the street, back into the park. For the first time the black shirts had clear targets, and like predators triggered by blurs of fear, they too began to run.