
PENGUIN BOOKS

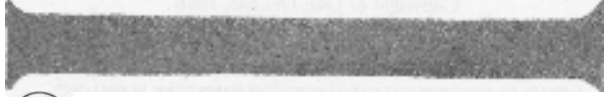
LIBRA

Don DeLillo published his first short story when he was twenty-three years old. He has since written eleven novels, including *White Noise* (1985), which won the National Book Award. It was followed by *Libra* (1988), his novel about the assassination of President Kennedy, and by *Mao II* (1991), which won the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. Other novels include *Americana*, *End Zone*, and *Great Jones Street*, all available from Penguin.

In 1997 he published the bestselling *Underworld*. In 1999 he was awarded the Jerusalem Prize, given to a writer whose work expresses the theme of freedom of the individual in society; he was the first American author to receive it. Don DeLillo is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

LIBRA

Don DeLillo



PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Putnam Inc.,

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.

Penguin Books Ltd, 27 Wrights Lane, London W8 5TZ, England

Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia

Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue,

Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2

Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182-190 Wairau Road,

Auckland 10, New Zealand

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England

First published in the United States of America by

Viking Penguin Inc., 1988

NAL/Penguin edition published 1989

Published in Penguin Books 1991

13 15 17 16 14 12

Copyright © Don DeLillo, 1988 All rights reserved

Portions of this book were published in *Esquire* magazine.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS HAS CATALOGUED THE HARDCOVER AS FOLLOWS:

DeLillo, Don. Libra. I. Title.

PS3554.E4425L53 1988 813'.54 87-40649 ISBN 0-670-82 317-1 ISBN O 1401.56046

Printed in the United States of America

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

To the boys at 607: Tony, Dick and Ron

PART ONE

In the Bronx

17 April

In New Orleans

26 April

In Atsugi

20 May

In Fort Worth

19 June

In Moscow

2 July

In Minsk

PART TWO

15 July

In Fort Worth

12 August

In Dallas

6 September

In New Orleans

25 September

In Mexico City

4 October

In Dallas

22 November

In Dallas

25 November



PART ONE

Happiness is not based on oneself, it does not consist of a small home, of taking and getting. Happiness is taking part in the struggle, where there is no borderline between one's own personal world, and the world in general.

LEE H. OSWALD Letter to his brother



In the Bronx

This was the year he rode the subway to the ends of the city, two hundred miles of track. He liked to stand at the front of the first car, hands flat against the glass. The train smashed through the dark. People stood on local platforms staring nowhere, a look they'd been practicing for years. He kind of wondered, speeding past, who they really were. His body fluttered in the fastest stretches. They went so fast sometimes he thought they were on the edge of no-control. The noise was pitched to a level of pain he absorbed as a personal test. Another crazy-ass curve. There was so much iron in the sound of those curves he could almost taste it, like a toy you put in your mouth when you are little.

Workmen carried lanterns along adjacent tracks. He kept a watch for sewer rats. A tenth of a second was all it took to see a thing complete. Then the express stations, the creaky brakes, people bunched like refugees. They came wagging through the doors, banged against the rubber edges, inched their way in, were quickly pinned, looking out past the nearest heads into that practiced oblivion.

It had nothing to do with him. He was riding just to ride.

One forty-ninth, the Puerto Ricans. One twenty-fifth, the Negroes. At Forty-second Street, after a curve that held a scream right out to the edge, came the heaviest push of all, briefcases, shopping bags, school bags, blind people, pickpockets, drunks. It did not seem odd to him that the subway held more compelling things than the famous city above. There was nothing important out there, in the broad afternoon, that he could not find in purer form in these tunnels beneath the streets.

They watched TV, mother and son, in the basement room. She'd bought a tinted filter for their Motorola. The top third of the screen was permanently blue, the middle third was pink, the band across the bottom was a wavy green. He told her he'd played hooky again, ridden the trains out to Brooklyn, where a man wore a coat with a missing arm. Playing the hook, they called it here. Marguerite believed it was not so awful, missing a day now and then. The other kids ragged him all the time and he had problems keeping up, a turbulence running through him, the accepted fact of a fatherless boy. Like the time he waved a penknife at John Edward's bride. Not that Marguerite thought her daughter-in-law was worth getting into a famous feud about. She was not a person of high caliber and it was just an argument over whittling wood, over scraps of wood he'd whittled onto the floor of her apartment, where they were trying to be a family again. So there it was. They were not wanted anymore and they moved to the basement room in the Bronx, the kitchen and the bedroom and everything together, where blue heads spoke to them from the TV screen.

When it got cold they banged the pipes to let the super know. They had a right to decent heat.

She sat and listened to the boy's complaints. She couldn't fry him a platter of chops any time he wanted but she wasn't tight with the lunch money and even gave him extra for a funnybook or subway ride. All her life she'd had to deal with the injustice of these complaints. Edward walked out on her when she was pregnant with

John Edward because he didn't want to support a child. Robert dropped dead on her one steamy summer day on Alvar Street, in New Orleans, when she was carrying Lee, which meant she had to find work. Then there was grinning Mr. Ekdahl, the best, the only hope, an older man who earned nearly a thousand dollars a month, an engineer. But he committed cunning adulteries, which she finally caught him out at, recruiting a boy to deliver a fake telegram and then opening the door on a woman in a negligee. This didn't stop him from scheming a divorce that cheated her out of a decent settlement. Her life became a dwindling history of moving to cheaper places.

Lee saw a picture in the Daily News of Greeks diving off a pier for some sacred cross, downtown. Their priests have beards.

"Think I don't know what I'm supposed to be around here."

"I've been all day on my feet," she said.

"I'm the one you drag along."

"I never said any such."

"Think I like making my own dinner."

"I work. I work. Don't I work?"

"Barely finding food."

"I'm not a type that sits around boo-hoo."

Thursday nights he watched the crime shows. *Racket Squad*, *Dragnet*, etc. Beyond the barred window, snow driving slantwise through the streetlight. Northern cold and damp. She came home and told him they were moving again. She'd found three rooms on one hundred and something street, near the Bronx Zoo, which might be nice for a growing boy with an interest in animals.

"Natures spelled backwards," the TV said.

It was a railroad flat in a red-brick tenement, five stories, in a street of grim exhibits. A retarded boy about Lee's age walked around in a hippity-hop limp, carrying a live crab he'd stolen from the Italian market and pushing it in the faces of smaller kids. This was a routine sight. Rock fights were routine. Guys with zip guns they'd made in shop class were becoming routine. From his window one night he watched two boys put the grocery store cat in a burlap sack and swing the sack against a lamppost. He tried to time his movements against the rhythm of the street. Stay off the street from noon to one, three to five. Learn the alleys, use the dark. He rode the subways. He spent serious time at the zoo.

There were older men who did not sit on the stoop out front until they spread their handkerchiefs carefully on the gray stone.

His mother was short and slender, going gray now just a little. She liked to call herself petite in a joke she really meant. They watched each other eat. He taught himself to play chess, from a book, at the kitchen table. Nobody knew how hard it was for him to read. She bought figurines and knickknacks and talked on the subject of her life. He heard her footsteps, heard her key in the lock.

"Here is another notice," Marguerite said, "where they threaten a hearing. Have you been hiding these? They want a truancy hearing, which it says is the final notice. It states you haven't gone to school at all since we moved. Not one day. I don't know why it is I have to learn these things through the U.S. mails. It's a blow, it's a shock to my system."

"Why should I go to school? They don't want me there and I don't want to be there. It works out just right."

"They are going to crack down. It is not like home. They are going to bring us into court."

"I don't need help going into court. You just go to work like any other day."

"I'd have given the world to stay home and raise my children and you know it. This is a sore spot with me. Don't you forget, I'm the child of one parent myself. I know the meanness of the situation. I worked in shops back home where I was manager."

Here it comes. She would forget he was here. She would talk for two hours in the high piping tone of someone reading to a child. He watched the DuMont test pattern.

"I love my United States but I don't look forward to a courtroom situation, which is what happened with Mr. Ekdahl, accusing me of uncontrollable rages. They will point out that they have cautioned us officially. I will tell them I'm a person with no formal education who holds her own in good company and keeps a neat house. We are a military family. This is my defense."

The zoo was three blocks away. There were traces of ice along the fringes of the wildfowl pond. He walked down to the lion house, hands deep in his jacket pockets. No one there. The smell hit him full-on, a warmth and a force, the great carnivore reek of raw beef and animal fur and smoky piss.

When he heard the heavy doors open, the loud voices, he knew what to expect. Two kids from P.S. 44. A chunky kid named Scalzo in a pea coat and clacking shoes with a smaller, runny-nose comedian Lee knew only by his street name, which was Nicky Black. Here to pester the animals, create the routine disturbances that made up their days. He could almost feel their small joy as they spotted him, a little jump of muscle in the throat.

Scalzo's voice banged through the high chamber.

"They call your name every day in class. But what kind of name is Lee? That's a girl's name or what?"

"His name is Tex," Nicky Black said.

"He's a cowpoke," Scalzo said.

"You know what cowpokes do, don't you? Tell him, Tex."

"They poke the cows," Scalzo said.

Lee went out the north door, a faint smile on his face. He walked down the steps and around to the ornate cages of the birds of prey. He didn't mind fighting. He was willing to fight. He'd fought with the kid who threw rocks at his dog, fought and won, beat him good, whipped him, bloodied his nose. That was on Vermont Street, in Covington, when he had a dog. But this baiting was a torment. They would get on him, lose interest, circle back fitfully, picking away, scab-picking, digging down.

Scalzo drifted toward a group of older boys and girls huddled smoking around a bench. Lee heard someone say, "A two-tone Rocket Olds with wire wheels."

The king vulture sat on its perch, naked head and neck. There is a vulture that breaks ostrich eggs by hurling stones with its beak. Nicky Black was standing next to him. The name was always used in full, never just Nicky or Black.

"Playing the hook is one thing. I say all right. But you don't show your face in a month."

It sounded like a compliment.

"You shoot pool, Tex? What do you do, you're home all day. Pocket pool, right? Think fast."

He faked a punch to Lee's groin, drew back.

"But how come you live in the North? My brother was stationed in Fort Benning, Georgia. He says they have to put a pebble in their hand down south so they know left face from right face. This is true or what?"

He mock-sparred, wagging his head, breathing rapidly through his nose.

"My brother's in the Coast Guard," Lee told him. "That's why we're here. He's stationed in Ellis Island. Port security it's called."

"My brother's in Korea now."

"My other brother's in the Marines. They might send him to Korea. That's what I'm worried about."

"It's not the Koreans you have to worry about," Nicky Black said. "It's the fucking Chinese."

There was reverence in his voice, a small note of woe. He wore torn Keds and a field jacket about as skimpy as Lee's wind-breaker. He was runty and snuffling and the left half of his face had a permanent grimace.

"I know where to get some sweet mickeys off the truck. We go roast them in the lot near Belmont. They have sweet mickeys in the South down there? I know where to get these books where you spin the pages fast, you see people screwing. The kid knows these things. The kid quits school the minute he's sixteen. I mean look out."

He blew a grain of tobacco from the tip of his tongue.

"The kid gets a job in construction. First thing, he buys ten shirts with Mr. B collars. He saves his money, before you know it he owns a car. He simonizes the car once a month. The car gets him laid. Who's better than the kid?"

Scalzo was the type that sauntered over, shoulders swinging. The taps on his shoes scraped lightly on the rough asphalt.

"But how come you never talk to me, Tex?"

"Let's hear you drawl," Nicky Black said.

"I say all right."

"Talk to Richie. He's talking nice."

"But let's hear you drawl. No shit. I been looking forward."

Lee smiled, started walking past the group hunched over the park bench, lighting cigarettes in the wind, the fifteen-year-old girls with bright lipstick, the guys in pegged pants with saddle stitching and pistol pockets. He walked up to the main court and took the path that led to the gate nearest his street.

Scalzo and Nicky Black were ten yards behind.

"Hey fruit."

"He sucks Clorets."

"Bad-breath kissing sweet in seconds."

"One and a two."

"I say all right."

"One two cha cha cha."

"He don't know dick."

"I mean look out."

"But how come he won't talk to me?"

"But what do we have to do?"

"Smoke a Fag-a-teeer."

"Ex-treeeem-ly mild."

"I say all right."

"But talk to us."

"We're talking bad or what?"

"But say something."

"Think fast, Tex."

"I say all right,"

At the gate a man in a lumber jacket and necktie asked him his name. Lee said he didn't talk to Yankees. The man pointed to a spot on the pavement, meaning that's where you stand until we get this straight. Then he walked over to the other two boys, talked to them for a moment, gesturing toward Lee. Nicky Black said nothing. Scalzo shrugged. The man identified himself as a truant officer. Scalzo tugged at his crotch, looking

the man right in the eye. Like so what, mister. Nicky Black did a little cold-day dance, hands in pockets, giving a buck-tooth grin.

Out on the street the man escorted Lee to a green-and-white squad car. Lee was impressed. There was a cop behind the wheel. He drove with one hand, keeping the hand that cupped a cigarette down between his knees.

Marguerite stayed up late watching the test pattern.

Lee purely loves animals so the zoo was a blessing but they sent him downtown to a building where the nut doctors pick at him twenty-four hours a day. Youth House. Puerto Ricans by the galore. He has to take showers in that jabber. John Edward tried to get him to talk to the nut doctor but Lee won't talk to John Edward ever since he opened the pocketknife on John Edward's bride. They have got him in an intake dormitory. They talk to him about is he a nail-biter. Does he have religious affiliation and whatnot? Is he disruptive in class? He doesn't know the slang, your honor. The place is full of New York—type boys. They see my son in Levis, with an accent. Well many boys wear Levis. What is strange about Levis? But they get on him about does he think he's Billy the Kid. This is a boy who played Monopoly with his brothers and had a normal report card when we lived with Mr. Ekdahl, on Eighth Avenue, in Fort Worth. It is a question of adjusting, judge. It was only a whittling knife and he did not actually cut her and now they don't talk, brothers. This is a boy who studies the lives of animals, the eating and sleeping habits of animals, animals in their burrows and caves.

What is it called, lairs? He is advanced, your honor. I have said from early childhood he liked histories and maps. He knows uncanny things without the normal schooling. This boy slept in my bed out of lack of space until he was nearly eleven and we have lived the two of us in the meanest of small rooms when his brothers were in the orphans' home or the military academy or the Marines and the Coast Guard. Most boys think their daddy hung the moon. But the poor man just crashed to the lawn and that was the end of the only happy part of my adult life. It is Marguerite and Lee ever since. We are a mother and son. It has never been a question of neglect. They say he is truanting is the way they state it. They state to me he stays home all day to watch TV. They are talking about a court clinic. They are talking about the Protestant Big Brothers for working with. He already has big brothers. What does he need more brothers for? There is the Salvation Army that is mentioned. They take the wrappers off the candy bars I bring my son. They turn my pocketbook all out. This treatment is downgrading. It is not my fault if he dresses below the level. What is the fuss about? A boy playing hooky in Texas is not a criminal who is put away for study. They have made my boy a matter on the calendar. They expect me to ask their permission to go back home. We are not the common drifters they paint us out to be. How on God's earth, and I am a Christian, does a neglectful mother make such a decent home, which I am willing to show as evidence, with bright touches and not a thing out of place. I am not afraid to make food last. This is no disgrace, to cook up beans and cornbread and make it last. The tightfisted one was Mr. Ekdahl, on Granbury Road, in Benbrook, when the adulteries started. But I am the one accused of excesses and rages. I took back my name, your honor. Marguerite Claverie Oswald. We moved to Willing Street then, by the railroad tracks.

He did Human Figure Drawings, which were judged impoverished.

The psychologist found him to be in the upper range of Bright Normal Intelligence.

The social worker wrote, "Questioning elicited the information that he feels almost as if there is a veil between him and other people through which they cannot reach him, but he prefers this veil to remain intact."

The schoolteacher reported that he sailed paper planes around the room.

He returned to the seventh grade until classes ended. In summer dusk the girls lingered near the benches on Bronx Park South. Jewish girls, Italian girls in tight skirts, girls with ankle bracelets, their voices murmurous with the sound of boys' names, with song lyrics, little remarks he didn't always understand. They talked to him when he walked by, making him smile in his secret way.

Oh a woman with beer on her breath, on the bus coming home from the beach. He feels the tired salty sting in his eyes of a day in the sun and water.

"The trouble leaving you with my sister," Marguerite said, "she had too many children of her own. Plus the normal disputes of family. That meant I had to employ Mrs. Roach, on Pauline Street, when you were two. But I came home one day and saw she whipped you, raising welts on your legs, and we moved to Sherwood Forest Drive."

Heat entered the flat through the walls and windows, seeped down from the tar roof. Men on Sundays carried pastry in white boxes. An Italian was murdered in a candy store, shot five times, his brains dashing

the wall near the comic-book rack. Kids trooped to the store from all around to see the traces of grayish spatter. His mother sold stockings in Manhattan.

A woman on the street, completely ordinary, maybe fifty years old, wearing glasses and a dark dress, handed him a leaflet at the foot of the El steps. *Save the Rosenbergs*, it said. He tried to give it back, thinking he would have to pay for it, but she'd already turned away. He walked home, hearing a lazy radio voice doing a ballgame. Plenty of room, folks. Come on out for the rest of this game and all of the second. It was a Sunday, Mother's Day, and he folded the leaflet neatly and put it in his pocket to save for later.

There is a world inside the world.

He rode the subway up to Inwood, out to Sheepshead Bay. There were serious men down there, rocking in the copper light. He saw chinamen, beggars, men who talked to God, men who lived on the trains, day and night, bruised, with matted hair, asleep in patient bundles on the wicker seats. He jumped the turnstiles once. He rode between cars, gripping the heavy chain. He felt the friction of the ride in his teeth. They went so fast sometimes. He liked the feeling they were on the edge. How do we know the motorman's not insane? It gave him a funny thrill. The wheels touched off showers of blue-white sparks, tremendous hissing bursts, on the edge of no-control. People crowded in, every shape face in the book of faces. They pushed through the doors, they hung from the porcelain straps. He was riding just to ride. The noise had a power and a human force. The dark had a power. He stood at the front of the first car, hands flat against the glass. The view down the tracks was a form of power. It was a secret and a power. The beams picked out secret things. The noise was pitched to a fury he located in the mind, a satisfying wave of rage and pain.

Never again in his short life, never in the world, would he feel this inner power, rising to a shriek, this secret force of the soul in the tunnels under New York.

17 April

Nicholas Branch sits in the book-filled room, the room of documents, the room of theories and dreams. He is in the fifteenth year of his labor and sometimes wonders if he is becoming bodiless. He knows he is getting old. There are times when he can't concentrate on the facts at hand and has to come back again and again to the page, the line, the fine-grained detail of a particular afternoon. He wanders in and out of these afternoons, the bright hot skies that give tone and depth to narrow data. He falls asleep sometimes, slumped in the chair, a hand curled on the broadloom rug. This is the room of growing old, the fireproof room, paper everywhere.

But he knows where everything is. From a stack of folders that reaches halfway up a wall, he smartly plucks the one he wants. The stacks are everywhere. The legal pads and cassette tapes are everywhere. The books fill tall shelves along three walls and cover the desk, a table and much of the floor. There is a massive file cabinet stuffed with documents so old and densely packed they may be ready to ignite spontaneously. Heat and light. There is no formal system to help him track the material in the room. He uses hand and eye, color and shape and memory, the configuration of suggestive things that link an object to its contents. He wakes up suddenly, wondering where he is.

Sometimes he looks around him, horrified by the weight of it all, the career of paper. He sits in the data-spew of hundreds of lives. There's no end in sight. When he needs something, a report or transcript, anything, any level of difficulty, he simply has to ask. The Curator is quick to respond, firm in his insistence on forwarding precisely the right document in an area of research marked by ambiguity and error, by political bias, systematic fantasy. But not just the right document, not just an obscure footnote from an open source. The Curator sends him material not seen by anyone outside the headquarters complex at Langley, material that includes the results of internal investigations, confidential files from the Agency's own Office of Security. Branch hasn't met the current Curator and doubts if he ever will. They talk on the telephone, terse as snowbirds but unfailingly polite, fellow bookmen after all.

Nicholas Branch in his glove-leather armchair is a retired senior analyst of the Central Intelligence Agency, hired on contract to write the secret history of the assassination of President Kennedy. Six point nine seconds of heat and light. Let's call a meeting to analyze the blur. Let's devote our lives to understanding this moment, separating the elements of each crowded second. We will build theories that gleam like jade idols, intriguing systems of assumption, four-faced, graceful. We will follow the bullet trajectories backwards to the lives that occupy the shadows, actual men who moan in their dreams. Elm Street. A woman wonders why she is sitting on the grass, bloodspray all around. Tenth Street. A witness leaves her shoes on the hood of a bleeding policeman's car. A strangeness, Branch feels, that is almost holy. There is much here that is holy, an aberration in the heartland of the real. Let's regain our grip on things.

He enters a date on the home computer the Agency has provided for the sake of convenient tracking. April 17, 1963. The names appear at once, with backgrounds, connections, locations. The bright hot skies. The shady street of handsome old homes framed in native oak.

American kitchens. This one has a breakfast nook, where a man named Walter Everett Jr. was sitting, thinking—Win, as he was called—lost to the morning noises collecting around him, a stir of the all-familiar, the heartbeat mosaic of every happy home, toast springing up, radio voices with their intimate and busy timbre, an optimistic buzz living in the ear. The Record-Chronicle was at his elbow, still fresh in its newsboy fold. Images wavered in the sunlit trim of appliances, something always moving, a brightness flying, so much to know in the world. He stirred the coffee, thought, stirred, sat in the wide light, spoon dangling now, a gentle and tentative man, it would be fair to say, based solely on appearance.

He was thinking about secrets. Why do we need them and what do they mean? His wife was reaching for the sugar.

He had important thoughts at breakfast. He had thoughts at lunch in his office in the Old Main Building. In the evening he sat on the porch, thinking. He believed it was a natural law that men with secrets tend to be drawn to each other, not because they want to share what they know but because they need the company of the like-minded, the fellow afflicted—a respite from the other life, from the eerie realness of living with people who do not keep secrets as a profession or duty, or a business fixed to one's existence.

Mary Frances watched him butter the toast. He held the edges of the slice in his left hand, moved the knife in systematic strokes, over and over. Was he trying to distribute the butter evenly? Or were there other, deeper requirements? It was sad to see him lost in small business, eternally buttering, turning routine into empty compulsion, without meaning or need.

She knew how to worry reasonably. She knew how to use the sound of her own voice to bring him back to

what was safe and plain, among the breakfast dishes, on the tenth straight sunny day.

"One of the nicest things to watch? And I've never really noticed till we moved here? People coming out of church. Just gathering near the steps and talking. Isn't it one of the best things to watch?"

"You thought you'd find outlaws down here."

"I like it here. You're the one."

"Men swaggering into saloons. Thirsty from cattle drives."

"I mean churches anywhere. I just never paid attention before."

"I like to watch people come out of motels."

"No but I'm serious. There's something lovely about a church lawn or church steps with the service just ended and people slowly coming out and forming little groups. They look so nice."

"That's what I didn't like about Sundays when I was growing up. All the frumpy people in their starchy clothes. Depressed the hell out of me."

"What's wrong with frumpy? I like being a middle-aged frump."

"I didn't mean you."

He reached across the table and touched her arm as he always did when he thought he might have said something wrong or cut her off. Don't listen to what I say. Trust my hands, my touch.

"It's so comfortable," she said.

We tend to draw together to seek mutual solace for our disease. This is what he thought at the breakfast table in the sweet old house, turn-of-the-century, with the curved porch, the oak posts furred in trumpet vines. He had time to think, time to become an old man in aspic, in sculptured soap, quaint and white. It was not unusual for men in the clandestine service to retire at age fifty-one. A pension plan had been approved by some committee and a statement had been issued about the onerous and dangerous lives led by such people; the family problems; the transient nature of assignments. But Win Everett's retirement wasn't exactly voluntary. There was the business in Coral Gables. There were visits to the polygraph machine. And from three levels of specialists he heard the term "motivational exhaustion." Two were CIA psychiatrists, the other a cleared contact in the outside world, the place he found so eerie and real.

They called it semiretirement. A semantic kindness. They set him up in a teaching post here and paid him a retainer to recruit likely students as junior officer trainees. In a college for women, this was a broad comic thrust even Win could appreciate in a bitter and self-punishing way, as if he were still on their side, watching himself from a distance.

This is what we end up doing, he thought. Spying on ourselves. We are at the mercy of our own detachment. A thought for breakfast.

He folded the lightly toasted slice, ready at last to eat. In his ordinary body she saw the power of conviction. A lean and easy frame. A mild face, clear eyes, high and sad and mottled forehead. There was a burning faith in this man, a sense of cause. Mary Frances saw this more clearly than ever now that he'd been sent away from the councils and planning groups, the task forces, the secret training sites. Deprived of real duties, of contact with the men and events that informed his zeal, he was becoming all principle, all zeal. She was afraid he would turn into one of those men who make a saintliness of their resentment, shining through the years with a pure and tortured light. The radio said high seventies. God is alive and well in Texas.

Suzanne came in, hungry all over again, their six-year-old. She stood with her head plopped against her daddy's arm, feet crossed in a certain way, half sullen, a routine bid for attention. She had her mother's matter-of-fact blondness, hair thick and wiry, her face paler than Mary Frances's, without the wind-roughened texture. Because they'd wanted a child but had given up hope, she was a sign of something unselfish in the world, some great-hearted force that could turn their smallness to admiring awe. Win gathered her in, allowing her to collapse dramatically. He fed her the rest of his toast and made slobbering sounds while she chewed, his gray eyes excited. Mary Frances listened to *Life Line* on KDNT, a commentary on the need for parents to be more vigilant in checking what their children read and watch and listen to.

"Danger everywhere," said the grim voice.

Win tapped his breast pocket for a cigarette. Suzanne hurried out, hearing the school bus. A silence fell, the first of the day's pauses, the first small exhaustion. Then Mary Frances in her Viyella robe began to remove things from the table, a series of light clear sounds hanging in the air, discreet as hand bells.

The two men sat in Win Everett's temporary office in the basement of the Old Main, under a weak and twitchy fluorescent light. Win was in shirtsleeves, smoking, eager to talk, surprised and a little dismayed at

the high anticipation he felt, sharing news with a former colleague face to face.

Carpenters worked in the hallway, men with close-cropped hair and poky drawls, calling to each other under the steam ducts.

Laurence Parmenter leaned forward in his chair, a tall broad man in a blue oxford shirt and dark suit. He showed a vigor even in repose, his blond hair touched with silver at the sideburns, and he had the air of a man who wishes to conduct business, affably, over jokes and drinks. Win thought he was an impressive sort of fellow, self-assured, well connected, one of the men behind the crisp and scintillating coup in Guatemala in 1954, a collector of vintage wines, friend and fellow veteran of the Bay of Pigs.

"My God, they buried you."

"Texas Woman's University. Savor the name."

"What do you teach?"

"History and economics. Somebody in the DDP asked me to check out promising students for them. Foreign girls in particular. If there's a future prime minister here, the idea is we recruit her now, while she's still a virgin."

"Christamighty."

"First they hand me over to the psychiatrists," Win said. "Then they send me into exile. What country is this anyway?"

They both laughed.

"I say the name to myself all the time. I let it flow over me. I linger in its aura."

"Texas Woman's University," Parmenter whispered almost reverently.

Win sat nodding. He and Larry Parmenter had belonged to a group called SE Detailed, six military analysts and intelligence men. The group was one element in a four-stage committee set up to confront the problem of Castro's Cuba. The first stage, the Senior Study Effort, consisted of fourteen high officials, including presidential advisers, ranking military men, special assistants, undersecretaries, heads of intelligence. They met for an hour and a half. Then eleven men left the room, six men entered. The resulting group, called SE Augmented, met for two hours. Then seven men left, four men entered, including Everett and Parmenter. This was SE Detailed, a group that developed specific covert operations and then decided which members of SE Augmented ought to know about these plans. Those members in turn wondered whether the Senior Study Effort wanted to know what was going on in stage three. Chances are they didn't. When the meeting in stage three was over, five men left the room and three paramilitary officers entered to form Leader 4. Win Everett was the only man present at both the third and fourth stages.

"Could actually be worse," Parmenter said. "At least you're still in."

"I'd love to be out, completely, once and for all."

"And do what?"

"Start my own firm. Consult."

"On what, secret invasions?"

"That's one problem. I'm something of a tainted commodity. The other difficulty is I have precious little instinct for business ventures. I know how to teach. CIA has a picture of my prelapsarian soul in their files. They looked at it and sent me here."

"They kept you on. That's the point. They understand more deeply than you think they do."

"I'd love to be out forever. As long as I'm here, I still work for them, even though it's all a poor sick joke."

"They'll bring you back, Win."

"Do I want to be brought back? I don't like the kind of double-minded feeling I have about this thing. Despise them on the one hand; crave their love and understanding on the other."

Knowledge was a danger, ignorance a cherished asset. In many cases the DCI, the Director of Central Intelligence, was not to know important things. The less he knew, the more decisively he could function. It would impair his ability to tell the truth at an inquiry or a hearing, or in an Oval Office chat with the President, if he knew what they were doing in Leader 4. or even what they were talking about, or muttering in their sleep. The Joint Chiefs were not to know. The operational horrors were not for their ears. Details were a form of contamination. The Secretaries were to be insulated from knowing. They were happier not knowing, or knowing too late. The Deputy Secretaries were interested in drifts and tendencies. They expected to be misled. They counted on it. The Attorney General wasn't to know the queasy details. Just get results. Each level of the committee was designed to protect a higher level. There were complexities of speech. A man needed special experience and insight to work true meanings out of certain murky remarks. There were pauses and blank looks. Brilliant riddles floated up and down the echelons, to be pondered,

solved, ignored. It had to be this way, Win admitted to himself. The men at his level were spawning secrets that quivered like reptile eggs. They were planning to poison Castro's cigars. They were designing cigars equipped with micro-explosives. They had a poison pen in the works. They were conspiring with organized-crime figures to send assassins to Havana, poisoners, snipers, saboteurs. They were testing a botulin toxin on monkeys. Fidel would be seized by cramps, vomiting and fits of coughing, just like the long-tailed primates, and horribly die. Have you ever seen a monkey coughing uncontrollably? Gruesome. They wanted to put fungus spores in his scuba suit. They were devising a sea shell that would explode when he went swimming. The members of the committee would allow only generalities to carry upward. It was the President, of course, who was the final object of their protective instincts. They all knew that JFK wanted Castro cooling on a slab but they weren't allowed to let on to him that his guilty yearning was the business they'd charged themselves to carry out. The White House was to be the summit of unknowing. It was as if an unsullied leader redeemed some ancient truth which the others were forced to admire only in the abstract, owing to their mission in the convoluted world.

But there were even deeper shadows, strange and grave silences surrounding plans to invade the island. The President knew about this, of course—knew the broad contours, had a sense of the promised outcome. But the system still operated as an insulating muse. Let him see the softer tones. Shield him from responsibility. Secrets build their own networks, Win believed. The system would perpetuate itself in all its curious and obsessive webbing, its equivocations and patient riddles and levels of delusional thought, at least until the men were on the beach.

After the Bay of Pigs, nothing was the same. Win spent the spring of '61 traveling between Miami, Washington and Guatemala City to close out different segments of the operation, get drunk with station chiefs and advisers, try to explain to exile leaders what went wrong. It was the unraveling of the plot, the first weeks of a wreckage whose life span he seemed determined to prolong at the risk of his own well-being, as if he wanted to compensate for the half-measures that had brought about defeat. A new committee replaced the old, structured less cleverly, although many of the same men, to no one's shocked surprise, took chairs in the paneled room. The death of Fidel Castro was the small talk once more. But SE Detailed and Leader 4 would not take part. The groups were disbanded, their members marked not as failed plotters and operatives but as the Americans in the invasion array who had the deepest personal involvement in the exiles' cause. It was precisely the true believers who must be removed. Their contact with the exile leaders, their work in assembling and training the assault brigade, had made these men overresponsive to policy shifts, light-sensitive, unpredictable. All this was unspoken, of course. The groups simply disappeared and the members were given scattered duties unrelated to Castro's Cuba, the moonlit fixation in the emerald sea. Interestingly, some of the men continued to meet.

"Will he find us?"

"I have a feeling he's already here," Win said.

"My plane leaves at five-twenty-five."

"He'll find us."

They sat at the lunch counter in Shraders Pharmacy on the courthouse square. Win stirred his coffee, thought, sat, stirred. Larry kept ducking in his seat to get a better look at the Denton County courthouse, a limestone building of mixed and vigorous character, with turrets, pediments, marble columns, pointed domes, roof balustrades, Second Empire pavilions.

"I look at these ornate old buildings in bustling town squares and I find them full of a hopefulness I think I cherish. Look at the thing. It's so imposing. Imagine a man at the turn of the century coming to a small Southwestern town and seeing a building like this. What stability and civic pride. It's an optimistic architecture. It expects the future to make as much sense as the past."

Win said nothing.

"I'm talking about the American past," Larry said, "as we naively think of it, which is the one kind of innocence I endorse."

The subject ostensibly was Cuba. They'd met several times in an apartment in Coral Gables, a place Parmenter had used to brief Cuban pilots on their way to Nicaragua. They talked about maintaining contacts in the exile community, setting up a network in the Castro government. They were five men who could not let go of Cuba. But they were also an outlawed group. This gave their meetings a self-referring character. Things turned inward. There was only one secret that mattered now and that was the group itself.

"Only be a minute," Win said.

They walked under a canopy and went into the long dark interior of the hardware store, a place of lost and

reproachful beauty, with displays of frontier tools and ancient weighing machines, where Win often came to walk the two aisles like a tourist in waist-high ruins, expanded and sad. He had to remind himself it was only hardware. He bought a paint scraper and when they got back to Larry's rented car, parked off the square, they saw a figure in the front seat, passenger side, a broad-shouldered man in a loud sport shirt. This was T. J. Mackey, a cowboy type to Win's mind but probably the most adept of the men in Leader 4, a veteran field officer who'd trained exiles in assault weapons and supervised early phases of the landings.

Parmenter got behind the wheel, humming something that amused him. Win sat in the middle of the rear seat, giving directions. With Mackey here, the day took on purpose. T-Jay did not bring news of hirings and firings, the births of babies. He was one of the men the Cubans would follow without question. He was also the only man who'd refused to sign a letter of reprimand when the secret meetings in Coral Gables were monitored by the Office of Security. If a monumental canvas existed of the five grouped conspirators, a painting that showed them with knit brows and twisted torsos, darkly scheming men being confronted by crewcut security agents in khaki suits with natural shoulders, it might be titled "Light Entering the Cave of the Ungodly." Parmenter and two others signed letters of reprimand that were placed in their personnel files. Win signed a letter and also agreed to a technical interview, or polygraph exam. He signed a quit claim, stating that he was taking the test voluntarily. He signed a secrecy agreement, stating that he would talk to no one about the test. When he failed the polygraph, security men sealed his office, a small room with a blue door on the fourth floor of the Agency's new headquarters at Langley. In the office they found telephone notes and documents that seemed to indicate, amid the usual ambiguities, that Win Everett was putting people of his own into Zenith Technical Enterprises, the burgeoning Miami firm that provided cover for the CIA's new wave of operations against Cuba. It was a little too much. First he heads a group that ignores orders to disband. Then he runs a private operation inside the Agency's own vast and layered industry of anti-Castro activities. When Win took a second polygraph he sat at the desk apparatus sobbing, after three questions, the electrodes planted in his palm, the cuff around his bicep, the rubber tube traversing his chest. It was such an effort not to lie. They drove south out of Denton into deep-green country. There were pastures abandoned to mesquite and juniper, places of sudden starkness, a burning glare, a single squat tree, burlled and grim. The sky towered unbearably here.

Mackey sat with his right arm out the window, hanging down along the door. He showed no interest in the scenic details of the ride. They passed a Baptist church set on cinder blocks. He responded to remarks with a faint tilt of the head, a raised jaw, to show agreement or amusement.

Parmenter said, "There must be people in these old graveyards who came out on wagon trains. Circuit riders, Indian fighters. It's pretty country, Win. What the hell. Why not settle in, raise your little girl, sign up for the concert and drama series. The school's bound to have one. No, I mean it."

Eyes in the rearview mirror.

The psychiatrists were not unkind. But they'd made him aware of illness and disease. They carried disease with them. They were ill themselves. There were areas of their faces they'd neglected to shave carefully. He didn't have the heart to tell them. They were nice men but incomplete, or too complete. He saw the microscopic hairs so clearly. Motivational fatigue. The Agency was tolerant of such problems. The Agency understood. The truth was he hadn't placed agents in Zenith Technical Enterprises. His old team was already there, working with new case officers, prepared to run sea raids from secret bases in the Keys. But the evidence, thin, sketchy, incidental, was too far-reaching in principle to be convincingly denied by a man in his condition. It was easier to believe than to deny. They'd deciphered his notes, read his typewriter ribbons. Could he tell them he loved Cuba, knew the language and the literature? They had the contents of his burn bags. How could he make them see there was nothing to his scheme but the marginal notes of a diehard and fool?

He took off his jacket, folded it lengthwise and then top to bottom and dropped it on the seat next to him. He tapped his shirt pocket for a cigarette.

They went along a farm-to-market road and crossed the Old Alton Bridge, over Hickory Creek. Win indicated a right turn. They went down a red dirt road that ran a quarter of a mile under a thick canopy of post oaks and hickories. Woods on one side, pasture on the other. Larry eased the car to a stop alongside the rail fence. Win lit a cigarette, leaning forward from the middle of the seat. The two men up front sat with their heads tilted slightly toward him, although neither turned at any time to look back.

"When my daughter tells me a secret," Win said, "her hands get very busy. She takes my arm, grabs me by the shirt collar, pulls me close, pulls me into her life. She knows how intimate secrets are. She likes to tell me things before she goes to sleep. .Secrets are an exalted state, almost a dream state. They're a way of

arresting motion, stopping the world so we can see ourselves in it. This is why you're here. All I had to do was provide a place and time. You came without asking why. You didn't consider the risks to your careers, associating with Walter Everett Jr. after what's happened. You're here because there's something vitalizing in a secret. My little girl is generous with secrets. I wish she weren't, frankly. Don't secrets sustain her, keep her separate, make her self-aware? How can she know who she is if she gives away her secrets?"

The two men waited.

"The invasion failed because high officials didn't examine the basic assumptions. They got caught up in a spirit of compelling action. They were eager to accept other men's perceptions. There was safety in this. The plan was never clear. No one was ever responsible. Some of them knew a disaster was in the works. They let it ride. They put themselves out of reach. They wanted it over and done. There was pressure to get all those armed exiles out of Florida and into goddamn Cuba. I'm not sure anybody thought about what happens to them after we drop them off at the beach. That's where we came in. We were on the airfields or the ships or we were locked in barracks with the exile leaders. They had brothers and sons among the dead and there were armed American soldiers keeping them from leaving the barracks at Opa-Locka. What could I tell those men? I felt like a messenger of plague and death. Then the long slow fall. I wanted to sanctify the failure, make it everlasting. If we couldn't have success, let's make the most of our failure. That's what we were doing at the end when we tried to keep things going. Just an empty exercise."

They waited. They were patient and attentive.

"The movement needs to be brought back to life. These operations the Agency is running out of the Keys are strictly pinpricks. We need an electrifying event. JFK is moving toward a settling of differences with Castro. On the one hand he believes the revolution is a disease that could spread through Latin America. On the other hand he's denouncing guerrilla raids and trying to get brigade members to join the U.S. Army, where someone can keep an eye on them. If we want a second invasion, a full-bore attempt this time, without restrictions or conditions, we have to do something soon. We have to move the Cuban matter past the edge of all these sweet maneuverings. We need an event that will excite and shock the exile community, the whole country. We know Cuban intelligence has people in Miami. We want to set up an event that will make it appear they have struck at the heart of our government. This is a time for high risks. I'm saying be done with half-measures, be done with evasion and delay."

A pickup came down the road and they rolled up their windows to keep the dust out. The driver gave a half-wave without taking his hand off the wheel. They waited for the dust to settle, then rolled down the windows. Win paused a moment before beginning to speak again.

"Some things we wait for all our lives without knowing it. Then it happens and we recognize at once who we are and how we are meant to proceed. This is the idea I've always wanted. I believe you'll sense it is right. It's the high risk we need. We need an electrifying event. You've been waiting for this every bit as much as I have. I believe that or I wouldn't have asked you to come here. We want to set up an attempt on the life of the President. We plan every step, design every incident leading up to the event. We put together a team, leave a dim trail. The evidence is ambiguous. But it points to the Cuban Intelligence Directorate. Inherent in the plan is a second set of clues, even more unclear, more intriguing. These point to the Agency's attempts to assassinate Castro. I am designing a plan that includes elements of both the American provocation and the Cuban reply. We do the whole thing with paper. Passports, drivers' licenses, address books. Our team of shooters disappears but the police find a trail. Mail-order forms, change-of-address cards, photographs. We script a person or persons out of ordinary pocket litter. Shots ring out, the country is shocked, aroused. The paper trail leads to paid agents who have disappeared in Venezuela, in Mexico. I am convinced this is what we have to do to get Cuba back. This plan has levels and variations I've only begun to explore but it is already, essentially, right. I feel its Tightness. I know what scientists mean when they talk about elegant solutions. This plan speaks to something deep inside me. It has a powerful logic. I've felt it unfolding for weeks, like a dream whose meaning slowly becomes apparent. This is the condition we've always wanted to reach. It's the life-insight, the life-secret, and we have to extend it, guard it carefully, right up to the time we have shooters stationed on a rooftop or railroad bridge."

There was a silence. Then Parmenter said dryly, "We couldn't hit Castro. So let's hit Kennedy. I wonder if that's the hidden motive here."

"But we don't hit Kennedy. We miss him," Win said.

Mackey fed quarters into the public phone in the Esso station about a hundred miles from the Louisiana border. He was trying to reach a man named Guy Banister, a former FBI agent who ran a detective agency in

New Orleans. Banister was a channel for CIA money supplied to the anti-Castro effort in the area. Mackey knew him in the period before the invasion, when Banister was shipping weapons and explosives to the exile forces. It was time to get in touch again.

The voice at the other end was not Banister's or his secretary's. It took Mackey a moment to place it correctly. David Ferrie. The investigator, bag man and spiritual adviser. Mackey put down the phone and walked across the windy plaza to his car.

David Ferrie made a face when he heard the click in his left ear. He had a tendency to wince. He winced all the time in front of mirrors when he patted on his homemade eyebrows and mohair toupee. Ferrie suffered from a rare and horrific condition that had no cure. His body was one hundred percent bald. It looked like something pulled from the earth, a tuberous stem or fungus esteemed by gourmets. But he wasn't about to give in, grow despondent, sit in a dark room drinking Tastee Shakes and jerking off. He had some lively interests. A cure for cancer was one interest, almost a lifelong interest. He'd done research and written papers on the subject. He was interested in hypnotism and could put people into trances. Flying was a deep and abiding interest. Ferrie had been a senior pilot for Eastern Airlines before his disease made him bald and before his sexual sport with boys became a widely known fact that Eastern officials found disconcerting. He was interested in the communistic menace. Cuba was an interest.

Moments after he put down the phone, Ferrie was in the small room behind Guy Banister's office, making faces in the mirror as he adjusted the semicircular eyebrows. He was on his way to a shopping center in Jeff Parish where a model fallout shelter was on display. He wanted to check the dimensions, see what kind of supplies they had and how they were stored. He already had rubber bedsheets and a battery radio with CONELRAD frequencies clearly marked. He knew about a munitions bunker to the southwest that might be converted to an effective shelter, deep in the ground, isolated, with food and water for many months. It was heart-lifting in a way to think about the Bomb. How satisfying, he thought, to live alone in a hole. Not because he resembled a mutant form of life but just to eke out extra time while all hell thundered on the surface. He'd earned a reward for his unlucky life.

Laurence Parmenter drove toward Love Field in his rented Dodge Dart. He preferred to avoid thinking about Everett's plan for the time being. He listened to the radio, to an evangelist talking about retail prayer and wholesome prayer. Pray for yourself, pray for the world. Win was a bright man, dedicated, loyal to the cause, bright, very bright, but he'd suffered some kind of nervous collapse. Happens all the time. He seemed well now, alert, in full control, but an idea needs time to reveal its facets, its shifting lights and fires. Not that Larry meant to let the matter drag. He wanted Cuba back and the sooner the better. He had interests there. He had rights, claims, hidden financial involvement in a leasing company that had been working toward a huge land deal to facilitate oil drilling. This was before the plucky rebels came out of the hills.

He would begin to think about Everett's plan on the flight back to Washington. Sip a Beefeater martini, nibble salted nuts, pray for himself, pray for the world. A line from an old drinking song popped into his head. But where from? From Cairo, 1944, morale operations, Office of Strategic Services. Larry was part of the Groton-Yale-OSS network of so-called gentlemen spies, many of them now in important Agency positions. He was not old money, not quite elect, but still a member, ready to accede to the will of the leadership. They were the pure line, a natural extension of schoolboy societies, secret oaths and initiations, the body of assumptions common to young men of a certain discernible dash. He sang aloud, "Oh we are the jolly coverts, we lie and we spy till it hurts." He was trying to recall the next line when the first of the airport signs appeared.

On the radio a news announcer said that police were still keeping watch over Major General Edwin A. Walker's home and grounds following a gunman's attempt to kill the controversial right-wing figure one week earlier. There were no new leads in the case.

After dark the stillness falls, the hour of withdrawal, houses in shadow, the street a private place, a set of mysteries. Whatever we know about our neighbors is hushed and lulled by the deep repose. It becomes a form of intimacy, jasmine-scented, that deceives us into trustfulness.

Win was in the living room turning the pages of a book. This is what he did, according to his wife, instead of reading. Turned pages until there were no more. He wondered whether the two men realized he'd called them here specifically for April 17, the second anniversary of the Bay of Pigs. A thought for bedtime. He turned another page.

Upstairs Mary Frances was in bed. She worried about the worn-out rug, thought about breakfast, thought about lunch, tried not to be too foolishly proud of the renovated kitchen, large, handsome, efficient, with its frostless freezer and color-matched appliances, on the quiet street of oak and pecan trees, forty miles north

of Dallas.

In New Orleans

A classmate, Robert Sproul, watched him cross the street. He carried his books over his shoulder, tied together in a green web belt with brass buckle. U.S. Marines. His shirt was torn along a seam. There was smeared blood at the corner of his mouth, a grassy bruise on his cheek. He came through the traffic and walked right past Robert, who hurried alongside, looking steadily at Lee to draw a comment.

They walked along North Rampart, on the edge of the Quarter, where a few iron-balconied homes still stood among the sheet-metal works and parking lots.

"Aren't you going to tell me what happened?"

"I don't know. What happened?"

"You're bleeding from the mouth is all."

"They didn't hurt me."

"Oh defiance. You're my hero, Lee."

"Keep walking."

"They made you bleed. It looks like they rubbed your face in it all right."

"They think I talk funny."

"They roughed you up because you talk funny? What's funny about the way you talk?"

"They think I talk like a Yankee."

He seemed to be grinning. It was just like Lee to grin when it made no sense, assuming it was a grin and not some squint-eyed tic or something. You couldn't always tell with him.

"We'll go to my house," Robert said. "We have eleven kinds of antiseptics."

Robert Sproul at fifteen resembled a miniature college sophomore. White bucks, chinos, a button-down shirt open at the collar. This was the second time he'd encountered Lee in the streets after he'd been knocked around by someone. Some boys had given him a pounding down by the ferry terminal after he'd ridden in the back of a bus with the Negroes. Whether out of ignorance or principle, Lee refused to say. This was also like him, to be a misplaced martyr and let you think he was just a fool, or exactly the reverse, as long as he knew the truth and you didn't.

It occurred to Robert that there was, as a matter of fact, a trace of Northern squawk in Lee's speech, although you could hardly blame him for it, knowing what you knew of his mixed history.

He spent serious time at the library. First he used the branch across the street from Warren Easton High School. It was a two-story building with a library for the blind downstairs, the regular room above. He sat cross-legged on the floor scanning titles for hours. He wanted books more advanced than the school texts, books that put him at a distance from his classmates, closed the world around him. They had their civics and home economics. He wanted subjects and ideas of historic scope, ideas that touched his life, his true life, the whirl of time inside him. He'd read pamphlets, he'd seen photographs in *Life*. Men in caps and worn jackets. Thick-bodied women with scarves on their heads. People of Russia, the other world, the secret that covers one-sixth of the land surface of the earth.

The branch was small and he began to use the main library at Lee Circle. Corinthian columns, tall arched windows, a rank of four librarians at the desk on the right as you enter. He sat in the semicircular reading room. All kinds of people here, different classes and manners and ways of reading. Old men with their faces in the page, half asleep, here to escape whatever is out there. Old men crossing the room, men with bread crumbs in their pockets, foreigners, hobbling.

He found names in the catalogue that made him pause with a strange contained excitement. Names that were like whispers he'd been hearing for years, men of history and revolution. He found the books they wrote and the books written about them. Books wearing away at the edges. Books whose titles had disappeared from the spines, faded into time. Here was *Das Kapital*, three volumes with buckled spines and discolored pages, with underlinings, weird notes in an obsessive hand. He found mathematical formulas, sweeping theories of capital and labor. He found *The Communist Manifesto*. It was here in German and in English. Marx and Engels. The workers, the class struggle, the exploitation of wage labor. Here were biographies and thick histories. He learned that Trotsky had once lived, in exile, in a working-class area of the Bronx not far from the places Lee had lived with his mother.

Trotsky in the Bronx. But Trotsky was not his real name. Lenin's name was not really Lenin. Stalin's name was Dzhughashvili. Historic names, pen names, names of war, party names, revolutionary names. These were men who lived in isolation for long periods, lived close to death through long winters in exile or prison, feeling history in the room, waiting for the moment when it would surge through the walls, taking them with it. History was a force to these men, a presence in the room. They felt it and waited.

The books were struggles. He had to fight to make some elementary sense of what he read. But the books had come out of struggle. They had been struggles to write, struggles to live. It seemed fitting to Lee that the texts were often masses of dense theory, unyielding. The tougher the books, the more firmly he fixed a distance between himself and others. He found enough that he could understand. He could see the capitalists, he could see the masses. They were right here, all around him, every day.

Marguerite browned flour in a heavy-bottomed pan. They watched each other eat. She was always right there, hands busy, eyes bright behind the dark-rimmed glasses. He could see the strain and aging in her face, the flesh going taut at the hairline, and he felt something between pity and contempt. They watched TV in the next room. Miniature willow baskets hung on the wall. Her skull was showing through.

"Lillian says I spoil you to a T. You think you own me, she says."

"I'm your son. You have to do what I want."

"I admit this, which I shouldn't say a word, but your brothers were a burden on my back. They demanded attention which it was not humanly possible to give. This is where the human element comes in. When I think of all the tragedies. Your daddy felt a pain in his arm, out mowing. The next thing I know."

"They're in the service to get away from you."

"When I think of being a grandparent who is denied affection. We ate red beans and rice on Mondays. I took you to Godchaux's in a stroller."

Ever since he could remember, they'd shared cramped spaces. It was the basic Oswald memory. He could smell the air she moved through, could smell her clothes hanging behind a door, a tropical mist of corsets and toilet water. He entered bathrooms in the full aura of her stink. He heard her mutter in her sleep, grinding the death's-head teeth. He knew what she would say, saw the gestures before she made them.

"I am entitled to better."

"So am I. I'm the one. I have rights," he said.

He helped her hang half-moon wall shelves. He would find a communist cell and become a member. This was a city with a hundred kinds of foreigners and ideas and influences. There were people who ran ads in the paper to seek favors of a patron saint. There were people who wore berets, who did not speak ten words of English. Down at the docks he saw oppressed workers unloading ninety-pound banana stems from Honduras. He would find a cell, be given tasks to prove himself.

"Lillian expects endless thanks. She lives off thank-yous and you're-welcomes."

"She thinks we're one jump up from handouts in the street."

"She thinks we're beholden," Marguerite said. "I was a popular child. I am willing to stand on the facts."

They'd lived with her sister Lillian on French Street. They took an apartment on St. Mary Street, eventually moving to a cheaper apartment in the same building. Then they moved to the Quarter.

He is a quiet and studious boy who demands his meals, like any boy.

"The Claveries were poor but not unhappy. We ate red beans and rice on Mondays. Just because she let us stay a few weeks, I know what she says behind my back. They talk and make up stories, which I am not surprised. They have hidden reasons they aren't telling for how they feel. They say I fly off too quick on the handle. I just can't get along, so-called. They never say it could be they're the ones at fault. They're the ones you can't reason with. She says I take one little word and make a difference out of it, which stands between us until we see each other on the street when it's 'Oh hello, how are you, come see us real soon.'"

"She thinks because she gives me money to rent a bike."

They lived in a three-story building in an alley that opened onto Canal Street, the dodging bodies and shopwindows glaring hot. The building had arched entranceways with decorative crests. That's what Marguerite liked most. It was otherwise a sad show. Lee had the bedroom, she took the studio couch.

In St. Louis Cemetery Number One he sees an old Negro snoring in his stocking feet, body propped against one of the oven vaults, the sun beating down on smashed amber glass.

They watched each other eat. He practiced chess moves at the kitchen table. She described houses and yards and furniture way back to the early decades of the century, in New Orleans, where she was raised, a happy child. He knew these things were important. He did not deny the value of what she said or the power of the images she carried with her. These were important things, family, money, the past, but they did not touch his real life, the inward-spinning self, and he let her voice fall through a hole in the air.

He sees a tough-looking Mexican or whatever he is suddenly strike a female pose outside a bar, getting a laugh from his friends.

He had his one-volume encyclopedia of the world, which his aunt Lillian said he read like a boy's novel of the sea. Kinetic energy. Grand Coulee Dam. He would join a communist cell. They would talk theory into

the night. They would give him tasks to perform, night missions that required intelligence and stealth. He would wear dark clothes, cross rooftops in the rain.

How many people know a killdeer is a bird?

He got a letter from his brother Robert, his full brother, who was still in the Marines. He took a page out of his spiral notebook and replied at once, mainly answering questions. He liked his brother but was certain Robert didn't know who he was. It was the age-old family mystery. You don't know who I am. Robert was named for their father, Robert E. Lee Oswald. That's where his own name came from, Lee. His father was at the end of the Lakeview line, turning to chalk.

"I took you to Godchaux's to see the flag, the two of us. The war was on and we lived on Pauline Street and they hung a seven-story flag right down the front of Godchaux's, where I bought my light-gray suit which I am wearing in the photo with Mr. Ekdahl, which is shortly after our marriage. A seven-story American flag. This is when you caused a flurry with Mrs. Roach, throwing an iron toy."

He wanted to write a story about one of the people at the library for the blind. That was the only way to imagine their world.

Marguerite had blue eyes and dark lashes. She was a sales clerk and cashier, working near the hosiery shop she'd managed, about a dozen years earlier, on Canal Street, before they fired her. She could not add or subtract was the stated reason. Marguerite knew better, felt the vibrations, heard the whispers of nasty attitude, of grudge against the world, which wasn't as bad as the time she was fired from Lerner's in New York because they said she did not use deodorant. This was not true because she used a roll-on every day and if it didn't work the way it said on TV, why should she be singled out as a social misfit? New York was not behind the times in strange smells.

He did his homework at the kitchen table, questions only morons would want to answer. She woke him up for school by clapping her hands in the doorway, insistently, the fingers of one hand tapping the palm of the other. Something in him turned to murder at the sight of her, sometimes, in the street, coming toward him unexpectedly. He heard her footsteps, heard her key in the lock. The voice called out from the kitchen, the toilet flushed. He knew the inflections and the pauses, knew what she would say, word for word, before she spoke. She tapped her hands in the doorway. Rise and shine.

"It is evident," he read, "that the definition of capital-value invested in labor-power as circulating capital is a secondary one, obliterating its specific difference in the process of production."

He tried to talk politics with Robert Sproul's sister, mainly to say something. They played chess on a closed porch at the Sproul house. Robert sat nearby doing a term paper on the history of air power.

She was a year older than Lee, soft-skinned, blond, with a serious mouth. He had a feeling she tried not to look too pretty. There were girls like that, hiding behind a surface of neatness and reserve.

"Eisenhower gets off too easy," Lee was saying, "and I can give you a good example."

"I don't think you can but go ahead."

"It was Eisenhower and Nixon who killed the Rosenbergs. Guaranteed. They're the ones responsible."

"Well that's just you're daydreaming."

"Well no I'm not."

"There was a trial unless I'm sadly mistaken," she said.

"Ike is a well-known boob. He could have stopped the execution."

"Like a movie, I suppose?"

"Do you know who the Rosenbergs are, even?"

"I just said there was a trial."

"But the hidden factors, the things that don't get out."

She gave him a tight look. She was just the right height. Not too tall. He liked her air of restraint, the way she moved the pieces on the board, almost bashfully, giving no hint of the winning or losing involved. It made him feel animated and rash, a chess genius with dirty fingernails. There was a mother or father moving around inside the house.

"I read all about the Rosenbergs when I was in New York," he said. "They were railroaded to the chair. The idea was to make all communists look like traitors. Ike could have done something."

"He did do something. He played golf," Robert said.

"Now Senator Eastland's coming to New Orleans. You know why, don't you?"

"He's looking for you," Robert said. "He can't figure out how a boy in the Civil Air Patrol."

"He's looking for reds under the beds," Lee said.

"He's wondering how a clean-cut boy."

"The main thing is in communism that workers don't produce profits for the system."

"He's looking at your cute smile and he's just real upset. A teenage communist in the CAP."

Lee half enjoyed the ribbing. He looked at Robert's sister to get her reaction but her eyes were on the board. Well brought up. He saw her at the library. She was on the pep squad at school, the girl at the far end who went more or less unnoticed.

"What if they did spy? It's only because they believed communism is the best system. It's the system that doesn't exploit, so then you're strapped in the chair."

Lee was aware that the parent, whichever one it was, had moved to the edge of the open doorway. The parent was standing there, on the other side of the wall, listening.

"If you look at the name Trotsky in Russian, it looks totally different," he said to Robert Sproul's sister.

"Plus here's something nobody knows. Stalin's name was Dzhugashvili. Stalin means man of iron."

"Man of steel," Robert said.

"Same thing."

"Dumb bunny."

"The whole thing is they lie to us about Russia. Russia is not what they say. In New York the communists don't hide. They're out on the street."

"Quick, Henry, the Flit," Robert said.

"First you produce profits for the system that exploits you."

"Kill it before it spreads."

"Then they're always trying to sell you something. Everything is based on forcing people to buy. If you can't buy what they're selling, you're a zero in the system."

"Well that's neither here nor there," the sister said.

"Where is it?" he asked her.

It was the father who appeared in the doorway, a tall man with a plaid blanket folded over one arm. He seemed to be looking for a horse. He spoke of homework and errands, he mumbled obscurely about family matters. The sister's relief was easy to see. It could be felt and measured. She slipped past her father and melted serenely into the dim interior.

The father walked with Lee to the front door and opened it as wide as it would go. They did not speak to each other. Lee walked home through the Quarter past hundreds of tourists and conventioners who thronged in the light rain like people in a newsreel.

He kept the Marxist books in his room, took them to the library for renewal, carried them back home. He let classmates read the titles if they were curious, just to see their silly faces crinkle up, but he didn't show the books to his mother. The books were private, like something you find and hide, some lucky piece that contains the secret of who you are. The books themselves were secret. Forbidden and hard to read. They altered the room, charged it with meaning. The drabness of his surroundings, his own shabby clothes were explained and transformed by these books. He saw himself as part of something vast and sweeping. He was the product of a sweeping history, he and his mother, locked into a process, a system of money and property that diminished their human worth every day, as if by scientific law. The books made him part of something. Something led up to his presence in this room, in this particular skin, and something would follow. Men in small rooms. Men reading and waiting, struggling with secret and feverish ideas. Trotsky's name was Bronstein. He would need a secret name. He would join a cell located in the old buildings near the docks. They would talk theory into the night. But they would act as well. Organize and agitate. He would move through the city in the rain, wearing dark clothes. It was just a question of finding a cell. There was no question they were here. Senator Eastland made it clear on TV. Underground reds in N'yorlenz.

In the meantime he read his brother's Marine Corps manual, to prepare for the day when he'd enlist.

There were two kids at school, in particular, before he quit, who called him Yankee all the time. Trailing him down the halls, calling across the lunchroom. He smiled and was ready to fight but they never made a realistic move.

The names on the order blanks excited him. Lisbon, Manila, Hong Kong. But soon the routine took hold and he realized the ships and cargoes and destinations had nothing to do with him. He was a runner. He carried paper to other forwarding companies and steamship lines or across the street to the U.S. Custom House, which looked like a temple of money, massive and gray, with tall granite columns. He was supposed to look eager and bright. People seemed to depend on his cheerfulness. The less important you are in an office, the more they expect the happy smile. He disappeared for hours at the movies. Or he sat in an unused office in a far corner of the third floor, where he spent serious time reading the Marine Corps manual.

He memorized the use of deadly force. He studied principles of close order drill and the use of ribbons and badges. He made unauthorized phone calls to Robert Sproul to read hair-raising passages about bayonet fighting. The whirl, the slash, the butt stroke. There was no end of things to quote from the manual. The book had been written just for him. He read deeply in the rules, impressed by the strictness and precision, by the stream of awesome details, weird, niggling, perfect.

Robert Sproul knew about a gun for sale, a bolt-action .22, a varmint gun, or we'll plink tin cans, and they went on Lee's lunch hour to a cheap hotel above the business district, among muffler shops and discount furniture, in the January chill. The lobby was like a passageway to a toilet. The rooms were on the second floor, above a boarded-up store with a sign reading Formal Rentals. Robert had the seller's room number but not his name. Supposedly he was an acquaintance of David Ferrie, an airline pilot and instructor in the Civil Air Patrol. Ferrie had commanded the unit Robert and Lee were enrolled in that summer, although Lee had attended only three sessions, just long enough to get the uniform.

The boys were surprised when Captain Ferrie himself opened the door. A man in his late thirties, sad-faced, friendly, standing in the doorway in a bathrobe and a pair of argyle socks reaching to his knees. He waved them into the room, looking carefully at Lee. The shades were drawn. There were clothes everywhere, Chinese food spilling out of white cartons, some bills and coins on the floor. The room stood in a kind of stupor, a time zone of its own.

"Boys, how nice. I was told to expect visitors. Alfredo is selling his gun, I understand. He claims he killed a man with that gun. Some gringo millionaire. Every Latin has killed a gringo in his daydreams. These are temporary quarters, you understand. Your flying ace is between assignments."

Ferrie sat in an armchair amid strewn clothing. Robert looked quickly at Lee. A strangulated grimace.

"Now let's see," Ferrie said. "Robert I know from our classes in the Eastern hangar at Lakefront. It seems a hundred years ago. But who's the shy one with the neat part in his hair?"

"I went a few times," Lee said, "but then I stopped."

"But you were there. I thought so. I was sure of it. In your uniform. A uniform makes all the difference. I know my boys. I never forget a cadet. Do you know Dennis Rumsey? Dennis is a cadet. He comes here after school. Do you know Warren Van Zandt, the fat boy? Warren's daddy has lung cancer bad."

"What about the rifle?" Robert said.

"It's around here somewhere. A Marlin bolt-action .22. It's clip-fed and you can have it real cheap because the firing pin's broken. Easy to fix. Take it to a welder, bang bang bang."

"Nobody mentioned broken," Robert said.

"They never do."

"Well I don't know, sir."

"Neither do I."

"If the rifle can't be fired as is."

"He'll weld an extension, bang bang."

"But this would mean an inconvenience."

"The pleasure may be worth it. Do you know guns? Guns are an interest of mine."

Robert shot a glance like let's get out of here. Something in the far corner seemed to be alive. Lee took a few steps in that direction. He was aware that some kind of well-intentioned look was pasted to his face, a smile not connected to things. There was a cage on the dresser with white mice running around inside.

He turned to Ferrie and said, "Mice."

"Isn't life fantastic?"

"What are they for?"

"Research. Here we are it's eleven years after the war, a new era, an age of hope, and we're no closer to ending the cancer plague than a thousand years ago. I've studied diseases all my life. Even as a boy I allotted my time. I knew what cancer was long before I heard the word. What's your name?"

"Lee."

"Allot your time, Lee."

Robert Sproul edged toward the door.

"Captain Ferrie, I think actually, sir."

"What?"

"I have to get going. I guess I'll take a rain check on the gun purchase."

"I've studied patterns of coincidence," Ferrie said to Lee. "Coincidence is a science waiting to be discovered. How patterns emerge outside the bounds of cause and effect. I studied geopolitics at Baldwin-Wallace

before it was called geopolitics."

"Lee, are you coming?"

Lee wanted to leave but found himself just standing there grinning stupidly at Robert, who made a dumb face back at him and walked out, sort of tiptoed out. Maybe Lee thought it wasn't nice to leave abruptly. But in that case Robert was the one who should have stayed. He was the honor student, well brought up, who lived in a house with a closed porch amid azaleas, oaks and palms.

"Tell me about yourself," Ferrie said. "First, ignore the mess. The mess belongs mainly to Alfonso, Alfredo, whatever he's called. Anywhere he settles, even for a minute, you sense an air of criminal intent. Works on a tug out of Port Sulphur. A job that wouldn't interest a boy with intelligent eyes like yours. Tell me about your eyes."

Ferrie was deep in the armchair. At this angle, in the uncertain light, he resembled an eighty-year-old man, wide-eyed with fear.

He was totally remote. Lee's sense of things was that he was one step ahead for having stayed, that Robert had bailed out too soon, that this business was too rich to be missed, and for the rest of his time here he experienced what was happening and at the same moment, although slightly apart, recounted it all for Robert. He had a little vision of himself. He saw himself narrating the story to Robert Sproul, relishing his own broad manner of description even as the moment was unfolding in the present, in the larger scheme, arms going like crazy, an animated cartoon, and he felt slightly superior in the telling. He'd stayed for the whole thing. What could be more squeamish and chicken-hearted than leaving too soon, thinking safety-first, home to your perfect family and plaid blanket, and then the thing turns out okay.

"If you allot your time, you can accomplish fantastic things. I learned Latin when I was your age. I stayed indoors and learned a dead language, for fear of being *noticed* out there, made to pay for being who I was."

He forgets I'm here.

"Cleveland," he said, making it sound like a lost civilization. "My father was a cop. I'm constantly haunted by the thought of cops, government cops, Feebees—the FBI. They're on you like the plague. Once you're in the files, they never leave you alone. They stick to you like cancer. Eternal."

This man is strange even to himself.

"What about the rifle?" Lee said. "Maybe I'll buy it. How much does he want for it?"

"He wants twenty-five dollars. But you give me fifteen. Because it's you, fifteen. You're one of my cadets. I look out for my boys. You wear a uniform, it makes all the difference. Look at me. I put on my captain's jacket, all this bleary shit just falls away. I become a captain for Eastern. I talk like a captain. I instill confidence in anxious travelers. I actually fly the goddamn plane."

He knows he's strange but can't help it.

"If I decide I'll buy it, how do I get it home?"

"How do you get it home is easy. You take it and wrap it in a blanket. You use that blanket right there. The hotel won't mind."

Added to everything else was the fact that he'd actually have the rifle. He'd emerge with the rifle. He'd be able to say he'd transported a rifle in a stolen blanket through the city of New Orleans. Ferrie watched the mice in the cage, made whistling sounds. All this built seamlessly into Lee's narration to Robert Sproul, the future inside the present, the little cartoon at the heart of events.

"The question is can you cure the disease before it kills you? Once you set out consciously to cure the disease, as I did even before I knew the word cancer, you run the risk of catching it. *Comprende?* Whatever you set your mind to, your personal total obsession, this is what kills you. Poetry kills you if you're a poet, and so on. People choose their death whether they know it or not."

"If we can find the .22 and wrap it up," Lee said, "I should probably be getting back."

"It'll be Carnival soon," David Ferrie told him. "Farewell, flesh."

He shouts for his meals. He hollers. I will be downstairs visiting with Myrtle Evans and we will hear him calling for his mother and I will jump right up and get upstairs to cook him his meal, like any boy.

Nobody knew what he knew. The whirl of time, the true life inside him. This was his leverage, his only control. He watched his mother browning flour, her hands rising sticky-white from the heavy-bottomed pan. He ran messages to steamship lines. He lay near sleep, falling into reverie, the powerful world of Oswald-hero, guns flashing in the dark. The reverie of control, perfection of rage, perfection of desire, the fantasy of night, rain-slick streets, the heightened shadows of men in dark coats, like men on movie posters. The dark had a power. The rain fell on empty streets. Always the men appeared, their long shadows bent behind them, then the rifle in his hands, the clip-fed Marlin, the idea of shooting for the gut, to draw out the dying.

sample content of Libra (Contemporary American Fiction)

- [Destiny: A Novel in Pictures \(Dover Fine Art, History of Art\) online](#)
- [click *The Depression Cure: The 6-Step Program to Beat Depression without Drugs*](#)
- [Wild Words from Wild Women: An Unbridled Collection of Candid Observations and Extremely Opinionated Bon Mots pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub, doc, mobi](#)
- [**read online *The 200 SuperFoods That Will Save Your Life: A Complete Program to Live Younger, Longer***](#)
- [read online *Three Hearts and Three Lions \(Operation Otherworld, Book 2.5\)* online](#)

- <http://crackingscience.org/?library/The-Price-of-Glory--Verdun-1916.pdf>
- <http://www.freightunlocked.co.uk/lib/The-Depression-Cure--The-6-Step-Program-to-Beat-Depression-without-Drugs.pdf>
- <http://aircon.servicessingaporecompany.com/?lib/Wild-Words-from-Wild-Women--An-Unbridled-Collection-of-Candid-Observations-and-Extremely-Opinionated-Bon-Mots.pdf>
- <http://yachtwebsitedemo.com/books/The-Black-Dagger-Brotherhood--An-Insider-s-Guide.pdf>
- <http://unpluggedtv.com/lib/The-Siege--68-Hours-Inside-the-Taj-Hotel.pdf>