

CHAPTER I

I'm sitting here waiting for her in the usual place, Betty's Bookshop. I check my watch. She's late. I look out the window to see if I can see her coming. I can't. Up till now she's been pretty good about the time thing. That's something I hate – people being late. But I guess it doesn't matter. I don't mind sitting here, reading. Betty has set out one corner of the shop with a few tables and a coffee machine. There's a rack of leaflets of upcoming events. And for those of us who are too mean and cheap to buy a half-way decent coffee, she also provides free coffee. It's the worst. Not much different from dirty dishwater. But hey, it's free. You get what you pay for. So here I am. Betty is behind the cash register with one of her girls. That's the way Betty swings. She may not know about coffee but she does know how to run a bookshop. And if it takes a dyke co-operative to achieve that, I have no qualms. That's just fine with me. Joe would cackle invective at the thought. 'You fucking pinko liberal shit.' I can hear him drawl out the words with mocking venom. It's almost as if he's still alive and living in the synapses of my brain. I'm not alone here. The girl at the next table is pale, no breasts, just skin and bones, face studded,

spotty, shoulder tattooed, hair matted. Got a baby with her. How on earth did she get a guy to pop her cherry? (That's the way bro, Joe cackles. You tell 'em.)

I check the time again. Alice is ten minutes late. I can read from the confusions of feeling that I'm feeling about this that I've kind of fallen for her. She makes my stomach quiver in a loose bowel sort of way. This is a new feeling for me. It was never like this with Norma. And Maddie screamed into and out of my life like a blazing comet. Falling in love at fifty-five is no joke. It's crazy. Silly. I feel a fool. She used to scare me. Not because she's scary. She isn't. Not at all. It's me. I'm pathetic. Emotionally very wobbly. Vulnerable. Like jelly. Not because of her. Because of everything else. I just didn't know it until I met her. Then I saw how impossible it was to just reach out. You've got to reach out from a place. I didn't have that place. There was nothing there. And she was beautiful and pretended not to see how it was with me. And she is so strong and confident and clear eyed and everything a person should be and I am still stuck in this thing that I should have got myself out of long ago. But I'm getting out of it now. Something's happening. That's scary too. A different kind of scary. I want her to know how I'm feeling but I'm scared it's too strong. Don't worry, I tell myself. She's not going anywhere. You don't have to rush anything. Just let the way you like her seep into your words and the way you talk and the way you wave your arms and the way you smile. Let her know. But you don't have to dump it on her all at once. Let her feel it. And if she likes it she'll let you know. That's what I tell myself. I call myself 'you'. Like I'm my own father. Weird.

But I'm not sure yet what to make of her new Cadillac. 'My husband left it,' she explained when she showed it to me. 'He came to see me to sort a few things out and when he left, he gave me his Cadillac. He's gone now. He won't be back. He's gone from my life.'

'How can you be so sure?' I asked.

'I just know.' And there was a firmness about the way she said it so I know she knows something she's not telling me. Like he's got terminal cancer or something. But I don't understand about the Cadillac. But then again, why should it make sense? Some things just don't make sense.

Above the coffee machine there's a TV. The flicker of it caught my eye. The sound is off but the images are clear enough. Our soldiers in Iraq. They're coming back. Barack says so. Yippee! And then what? We still haven't learned from Vietnam. You send soldiers to fight meaningless, vicious, enemy dehumanizing wars and they come back home, they bring the war back with them. And the grand violence of our policy makers gets transmuted into little parcels – small individually wrapped little packets – of hate and rage and brutality. I know about this. I feel a surge of disgust. I can't look at the screen any more. I can't watch it. The knowledge I carry is sour in my belly. And then there she is! Alice. She's sitting right there at the table smiling at me. She must have snuck up on me. Christ! I jump with the shock of her being there suddenly.

'Ouch! I didn't see you.'

'You were a hundred miles away.'

Ten thousand more like it. Or nine thousand two hundred and fifty to be a little more precise.

‘Was I?’ I smiled sheepishly and nodded. ‘I guess I was.’

‘Like you were in a trance.’

‘I must have been.’

She glanced over at the TV.

‘It’s good they’re coming home.’

For them. Not for those who have gone to replace them. Note of caution – look at the statistics, not the pretty pictures.

‘Yeah,’ I said dutifully, looking into her gray-blue eyes. And I am quivering in my soul that this woman is in front of me, is my friend, is the object of my soul’s desired connection.

‘What were you thinking?’

I shook my head.

‘You were thinking something,’ she persevered, half question half statement.

I nod. She waits. I’ll tell her or not. Up to me. No pressure. I want to tell her. I’ve already told her some. But the words won’t come.

‘Are you thinking about your brother, about Joe? Do you mind if I call him Joe?’

I nod and shake my head all at the same time. Why should I object?

‘It’s the same thing over again.’

Alice shakes her head and smooths back a strand of hair. ‘It doesn’t have to be like that.’

‘Doesn’t have to be. But it will.’

‘We’re wiser now,’ she persists.

If only. 'You give poor boys the tools and the attitudes to wreak ungodly violence, they're suddenly going to let it all just drop away? It's all going to magically disappear? Hmm?'

'People...' she started to speak but I was into my rap. 'When we lost Vietnam everyone just turned their heads away. Ignored it. Froze it out. And the whole world went along with us because we're the power on the block. We learnt nothing. So Iraq comes along and it's the same thing all over again. And it may not be the disaster that Vietnam was but...'

'We've done some good!' she protested.

'Have we? Maybe we have. I don't know.' What else was there to say? You read stuff in the papers, you see stuff on TV. But is it true? You know it isn't. You know it's what someone somewhere wants you to think, wants you to believe in. There's always an agenda. It makes me sick. Just give me the truth. Whatever that is! And would I know it if they did? Jesus, the whole thing stinks.

'Why don't you..?' she paused. Perhaps she wasn't sure how I was going to take it. Maybe she didn't want another rap laid on her. But she decided to go ahead anyway and say it. 'Why don't you write it all out?'

'How do you mean?'

'Write a book about the lessons we should have learned from Vietnam. You know, like writing therapy. Write it all out. Get it out of your system.'

This was a new idea. Something to think about. The truth. The reality. The basic building blocks to understanding. The alphabet. Yes, that was it! I suddenly had a glimpse of how it might be. The alphabet of Vietnam. It was a good idea. Not quite how she meant

it, maybe. But maybe if I tell the story. Joe's story, Maddie's story, Wash's story. Maybe then people will understand. Maybe in time Benjy will come to understand. Vietnam. The alpha-beta-gamma of the whole damn thing. Christ yes! Why hadn't I thought of that before? Just throw the whole thing down and see how it all comes together in its own way. If it does.

CHAPTER 2

For me it all started that day when Joe... What was he thinking that day? A normal day like any other, according to one of the only two men to see anything of what happened. Some sun. White clouds flecking the pale distant blue of the sky. The gorge itself rich with the colors of fall. Topton was the name of the place, the junction where highway 19, having climbed up the side of the mountain, ends in a T junction right at the head of Nahantala Gorge. A left turn takes you down the gorge with the stream beside you and the railway line on the far side. But here at Topton the railway track swings in towards the road and goes under the bridge that is the end of the highway. Then road and railway run parallel for a short way. According to the man who was painting his cabin a hundred yards or so away, standing on a ladder, he had taken little notice when he saw the car stop by the bridge and guessed it had come up the hill behind him. He heard the whistle of the train and it made sense why the man would want to stop his car at that point and watch. Trains! There was something nostalgic about a train – now just for freight and a day out with the family to see something of the countryside, but in the old days... Yessir. Trains

brought back memories. When going places was a high adventure. Here, the Great Smoky Railroad, did a trip or two most days. Goes from Andrews to Bryson City and on to Dillsboro. Excepting only that this wasn't the scenic train with its carriages filled with day-trippers but an unscheduled freight train hauling what-all-ever out of Andrews. That was all he saw: the man stopping and getting out of his car, the sound of the train and the man scurrying over the bridge. Nothing there to detain a man's mind and he'd flicked his eyes back to the job of putting a layer of enamel white paint on the woodwork of his cabin. And had it not been for the sudden metallic screech of the train whistle and brakes it would have sunk plumb to the bottom of the still well of his thoughts and disappeared without a trace. But when he heard the train come screeching – no other word for it – that high pitched whine of metal wheel scraping against metal rail, he guessed there might be something amiss and he'd stepped carefully down off of his ladder and put his paint down carefully and hurried best as he could, had to be careful of his hip that was troubling him some, to the bridge. When he got to the far side he couldn't at first see anything that might have caused the problem. But then he saw it and he had to turn away at the sight. God help him.

According to the train driver, they had just come out of the dark of the tunnel into the momentary dazzle at the far side. Something caught his eye. A movement he guessed. He turned to look back and saw this... this... (listening to him in the witness stand at the coroner's court you guessed he was struggling not to say idiot or some such descriptive word that summed up his true feelings)... yessir, the victim. Saw him scramble down the steep embankment.

It wasn't too far down. Just tall grass and low bushes at that point. He'd made it down to the trackside and for a few seconds seemed just to be running alongside the slow moving train but then he'd suddenly dived towards the train. God knows what he'd been trying to do. It didn't seem as if he'd tripped and stumbled. No sir. It had looked like a deliberate act. No, he couldn't say it was a clear-cut suicide attempt. Could be he'd wanted to catch himself a free ride. Maybe he just missed, misjudged the speed or the distance or his strength and he'd fallen across the track and the wheels had gone over him and well... sliced him in two. Messy business.

An accident. That was the eventual judgment of the court. Chrissie could cash in the modest insurance policy. There were no kids to think about. It was all hers. She could move on with her life.

And that day as I listened to the witnesses make their statements under oath it never occurred to me that suicide was a possibility.

I understood the train thing, the excitement, the sense of moving, going someplace, the adventure of it. I have a memory of trains and Joe. I guess it was when we were living in Lumberton, in Crescent Street – a small detail I remember because it was a strange name for a short straight street – just two lines of clapboard houses and trees and rubber tire swings that all merged one with the other without any fences between one yard and the next – a seamless stretch of grass and feelings. It was as if each section of the road had its own special shade of mood and smells. We lived there a year or two after dad died. Ma had a friend who lived there who helped us awhile. Crescent Street! Why's it called Crescent Street when it's

dead straight? I kept asking until every time I asked they'd hit me on the arm, specially Joe.

On days when we weren't doing anything much in particular we'd saunter down to the rail yards where they loaded the tobacco. The air would be sodden with the heavy smell of the tobacco leaves. It is still the smell of my boyhood. We'd squat by the track and from time to time a train would go by. The V and CS. The veeunseeeyess. That's how I saw it in my mind. It was just a sound. It was the sound of all trains, that odd hiccuping rhythm of a moving train tee-dum tee-dum (pause) tee-dum tee-dum (pause) tee-dum tee-dum (pause) the veeunseeeyess (pause) the veeunseeeyess. It didn't have any referent outside of that that I knew of. Later I found it stood for the Virginia and Carolina Southern Railroad Company. The track ran 100 miles in a straight line from the coast inland to Charlotte. We didn't know that. We'd see a train rolling by and we'd start shouting out the names of places we wanted to go to, maybe just because we liked the sound of the names.

'Kansas City.'

'Texas.'

'Nashville.'

'Santa Fe.'

'New Orleans.'

'San Francisco.'

Just any old name that sounded like it might be a neat place to travel to. Not discriminating between cities and states. And it didn't matter which names we called out because it wasn't any particular place but the whole wide world out there. I still have a sleeper pin, one of those eight inch nails of rusting raw shaped

iron they'd hammer into the wooden sleepers and the rails to keep it all in place. There were lots of them lying in the gravel bank by the side of the track. One day I picked one up and decided it was my lucky token. But it was too heavy for my pants, kept pulling them down. I soon got tired of it and left it at home. I use it as a paper weight.

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A is for arrival. It is hazy. There is hardly any color at all to the landscape. I had expected bright sharp colors but all I can see from the window is dull brown, a sort of gray-green, mottled concrete. Then a crunch as we hit dirt. A heavy landing and the roar of jets as we brake. We have been warned not to take any photographs in the vicinity of the airport. What are they frightened of? I remember the story of the American general inspecting Chinese troop emplacements. 'If the Russians come they will die!' the Chinese general proudly boasted. 'Yes, they'll die,' the American general agreed. 'They'll die laughing.' That's how it seems here. There is nothing here to hide. A few ancient aircraft sit on the apron. Some concrete loops, like huge pipes cut in half, run parallel to the landing strip. What on earth can they be for?

Disembarking, we are taken to a hall where we are given forms to fill in. They look like forms I have already filled in except that some of the questions are different. Along with nationality and religion they ask for details of my cultural level. I ponder this. Would 'American' be sufficient? Given that I am American should I write 'high' or 'low'? I don't know what value to give to my

cultural level. If I prefer jazz to classical music is this a minus? The room is organized so that immigration counters are set up on two sides of a square. The queues that form inevitably get entangled. There is some laughter at this. But perhaps the problem lies in the idea of queues. Maybe the arrangement is designed for huddles. The immigration officers work in pairs, a man and a woman. As ritualized as marriage. The woman at my counter is slim and delicately featured and very, very attractive. I am fortunately near the front of my huddle and it takes only twenty minutes or so to emerge into the freedom of the airport hall. I have now officially arrived. It's a strange feeling finally being here in Vietnam. I was too young to go myself – go to that Vietnam that was a war waging way over there on the other side of the globe. This Vietnam is not a war. It is just a place, a country. 'I'm here!' I think to myself wondering why on earth I think this is somehow significant. But it is.

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Back to Joe. It all started with that parcel, that letter. The funeral had been on the Friday. Now it was Monday lunchtime. I was in the college staffroom having sandwiches when Paulette from the office downstairs came in carrying a box.

'I'm sorry. I should have given you this earlier. It arrived last week when you were away, at your...' she hesitated, not knowing how to say it. I noted that she seemed slightly flushed, out of breath.

‘The funeral, yes, yes,’ I said to reassure her. ‘That’s fine.’ I took it from her hands. I looked at the address and saw it was in Joe’s handwriting and nodded to her that yes it was for me. He’d scrawled ‘urgent’ across the top. Why had he sent it here? I remember asking myself. Then I thought it must be Norma. He hadn’t wanted Norma to open it. I was slowly puzzling it out wondering whether or not to open it here or to wait till I got home. I took out my pocket knife and cut through the brown tape holding the box together. Inside there was a letter and below that some notebooks. I opened the letter reluctantly. I might easily not have opened it at all. I shiver when I think that I might not have read it at all. But I unfolded the sheets of paper and began to read.

Dear Fucking Brother,

I need someone to talk to. Guess you drew the short straw. This is buddy-buddy stuff OK? Strictly Confidential. Just you and me. And a bottle of Jack Daniels and my tortured dreams. Oh fuck Jack!!!! Shit! Why can't I keep my head in shape? I want to blow my fucking brains out. Jesus. For once I'm not cursing. Jesus save me. I wish I believed that crap. God and forgiveness. How can you forgive the unforgivable? I am beyond redemption. I've committed great evil and it won't go away. It sticks to me. I've tried scraping it off but the evil is in my very core. In my bones. In my fucking marrow. You're the literary bastard. Isn't there a phrase about that in Shakespeare? And if there isn't by God there ought to be. Jesus, this is hard. This is going to take much longer than I expected.

Will you forgive me? Why am I asking you? Jack, fucking brother Jack, you are reading this because I have decided to go ahead and kill myself. Truth is I'm already dead. When did I die? Didn't happen in one day. It wasn't like I was alive one day and dead the next. Guess I just took a long time dying. Now it's done and I am dead and Wash couldn't save me. Not this time. I fragged my insides and no-one can see except me. I'm leaving you these words so as you'll understand why I'm not coming back.

But you've got to do something for me. You've got to save my kid. Promise me you'll do that. Oh fuck. The kid's been driving me crazy. I've been talking to it – remember how I told you our Pa used to talk to you while you were still in Ma's belly. Well, that's how it's been with me. And the kid has judged me, Jack. Those wide open eyes of innocence. They see the truth of me. And the kid has to live – this kid is my future. This kid is the whole world to me. I really don't know how to explain it. But Maddie is the mother and if Wash has his way she'll be dead in a matter of weeks and the kid with her. But Wash is my brother and I cannot do him harm. Just cannot do it. I can kill myself but I cannot kill Wash. I thought about it. Believe me. Tried to psyche myself to do the deed. But although I am an evil bastard, I just could not do it. I am in a wild blue funk. You have no idea. I can't stop the whirl of thoughts in my sick head. Going mental. There's a look in her eye, a kind of knowing. I can feel it comprehending me. Did you ever feel that, Jack? The eye of wisdom and all knowledge? The look that sees right through you, and sees the

worst and forgives. That's right. She's scared. She knows the score. And I don't want it to happen but what's the choice? I can't let her go. Jesus, what else can I do? Christ!!!! Wash is my brother! Fucking brothers, man. That's the mantra. There ain't no other truth. Oh God! Oh God! And she's the suffering Virgin Mary. Can't explain it better than that. She's the very principle of goddamn everything that's true – it's her beauty, the beauty of trampled innocence. Jesus! What am I trying to say? She's what I yearned for when I was 17, when I was 18 and 19 and when I came back from Nam I was too ugly for it. And now she says she's having my baby. A baby. Oh Jesus. I can see the eyes looking at me right now, big round and innocent as judgment itself. Oh Jesus! Oh God! What do I do? What do I do? This can't go on. I can't go on feeling this way. We got to stop what we're doing but Wash ain't going to stop. I know him. It ain't his fault. He's been fucked up by life same as me. But I want to stop and he ain't going to stop. And she's going to die if I don't do something. And I feel she has in her something that can heal me. But I'm way past healing. I'm too far gone. I know that. Got to go. Time to do the deed. The least of ten thousand evils. Damn I wish I could save the girl. Jack? Could you be a fucking hero? You read these notebooks of mine you'll understand. Jack, do what I'm too chicken to do. Please Jack. It's the last thing I'll ever ask of you. Ha! That's a joke man – Sick joke, I know. Time to move. Don't think too badly of me, Jack, OK? I ain't all bad. Oh God! How do I say this? Jack. This is Goodbye. See you when you get to Hell! No. Shit. Can't leave it there. I'm just meandering

again. Let's get back on track. You got to go to the cabin (I've drawn you some maps) and you have got to rescue Maddie and the kid that's growing in her belly and if you can do this without killing Wash I would be very much obliged. But he's a mean fuck and if you have to do it, then do it. And maybe you need to do it anyway. You'll be doing the world a favor. Fuck! You don't know what I'm asking. You have no idea. And maybe I'm setting you up to be killed yourself. So you got to be careful now. You got to have a weapon. I'm trusting that you with your brains can find a way out of this mess. And I want you to know that much as I have abused you in my thoughts I have always respected you for your intelligence and stubborn persistence. You are the salt of the earth and if you were here I would hug you. I want you to know I am proud of you. Proud to have had you as a brother. Proud to have been your brother. Understand? I wish you good luck, brother. Bring the next generation of Gausses home and bring him up as if he was yours. For me. For my sake and for the sake of the kid you and Norma never had.

*Your ever loving brother,
Joe.*

I looked at the following pages that contained a number of maps – each one narrowing me in on a remote cabin deep in the Appalachians. The final one gave me a detailed layout of the cabin itself and the outhouses.

I had to read the letter several times. The truth refused to sink in. What's he trying to say? I asked myself, refusing to take in

the simple truth. And then at last I got it. There was a pregnant woman up in the Appalachians who might already be dead – but if she wasn't, it was my job to rescue her. And my first thought was just to hand this over to the cops and let them deal with it. But I thought of Waco, Ruby Ridge. The last thing I wanted to be responsible for was a shoot-out that ended in a tragedy. I just didn't trust them. Dammit, why couldn't I trust them? Why did I have to do it? And what exactly was it I had to do?

'You OK? You look as if you've seen a ghost,' Harland Fullilove commented. But the buzzer went for the start of afternoon classes and I was saved from having to respond. Fortunately, I had a free lesson. I was going to have to do some hard thinking.

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A is for Ao Dai. This is the national costume for girls and women. It consists of a top with a tight neck, that is taut down to the bottom of the rib cage, then flows like streamers separately front and back down to just below the knees. Under this they wear a pair of trousers that are tight round the buttocks and then the leggings billow out wide. It is a beautiful sight. Every time I saw an ao dai I turned to watch. It was only towards the end of my stay that I realized that I was eyeing up schoolgirls. The pure white ao dai is the national school uniform for secondary students. The young girls let their hair grow long. It flows down their backs to their waists. Some wear conical bamboo hats to keep off the sun. It is the very image of innocence to see a bevy of beautiful girls on their bicycles, shimmering white against the dust and green

of the landscape. Curiously, the girls not wearing no dais are not spectacularly beautiful. I understand a little more Joe's terrible compulsion. I look at these girls. Breasts firmly outlined. White underpants clearly visible. I am aware of the sexual tautening in my groin. I try to put it out of my mind. 'They're schoolgirls for Chrissakes!' I tell myself sternly. I feel like a rampant ape in Eden. Even at my age! I force myself to look elsewhere. 'Jesus, Jack!' I tell myself again, 'They're only schoolgirls!'