

PROLOGUE

Friday, December 13

I am what I dream, what I've done, what I've seen, what I choose to remember. What I choose to forget. I choose. I . . . came home early today, around 5:00, after a hard day at the office. Traffic was light going north from the Farm and I made all the lights on Dorado. Another perfect sunset, I thought, I remember, as I rolled down the window. Breathing sagebrush, I thought that the sky looked a lot like a national flag, striped with purple and orange and pink. It was hot for December.

I left the car in the driveway because my three year old daughter had built some kind of castle from boxes and blankets inside the garage. I could see her now. She was playing in the sprinkler at the edge of the yard, dressed in a neon-lime bathing suit. She laughed and looked up at me, waving. I waved back. That, I remember. I had my briefcase in one hand, with all of its secrets, and I lifted the other and waved.

My wife was waiting for me in the kitchen. She was wearing that apron with the pair of bosc pears on the front, baking cookies or bread, but she turned toward me anyway and gave me a peck on the cheek. "How was your day?" she said, twisting back to the stove.

I told her about the Indian house crickets I'd heard chirping in the stand of Huisache trees down the street. When she didn't say anything, I went down the hall to our bedroom. I took off my jacket and tie, and I wept.

All that I'd come to believe, all that I was, and still am, came apart in my hands then—like my tie. All simply unraveled. I put my jacket back on. I needed the jacket to hide it.

I hurried outside, to the back yard, to breathe. Mr. Billings was mowing his lawn down the street. He mows it every three days, no matter what time of year. It didn't seem right for him to be mowing his lawn with all of those holiday decorations behind him. The blow-up reindeer and sled. The Santa tied to the chimney. He had bound up each bush in his garden with Christmas lights. He would have wrapped up the tumbleweeds too if he could have caught them.

I'd just reclined on a sling garden lounge chair when my wife came outside with a tray of iced tea. Under her apron, she was wearing a pair of tan stirrup pants and a dark indigo shirt—no, iron blue, like her eyes. Her eyes.

She stood over me, smiled, and gave me a glass. I could hear the sprinkler splash-splashing and my daughter laughing nearby. I could hear those damned Indian house crickets. I could hear Mr. Billings still mowing his lawn. Still mowing although something was wrong. I could feel it.

I took a sip of my tea. I looked up at my wife, at her honey blond hair, her waxed eyebrows, her nose, and her perfect pink lips. I looked into her eyes. Everything was wrong.

I reached into my jacket, took my gun out and shot her—two times—in the chest.

Bang, bang.

More like two stifled sneezes than gunshots.

Or the clanging of stones underwater.

No one stirred. My daughter still played in the sprinkler, oblivious. And the incessant refrain of Mr. Billings' lawnmower never wavered or stilled. It droned on and on as I climbed to my feet. I stood over her; I looked down at the livid red blood pumping out of her chest, at her cornflower, china-doll eyes.

After a moment, I put the gun down on the lounge chair. I stared up at the sky and felt myself soar toward the heavens, over my rooftop and lot, higher and higher, the tract houses blending together in lines, sinuous oxbow contortions, with oases of shimmering swimming pools punctuating the desert as the Talking Heads' "Once in a Lifetime" unrolled like a band of black, bitter licorice through my head.

"And you may find yourself in a beautiful house, with a beautiful wife, And you may ask yourself—well . . . how did I get here . . . And you may tell yourself, This is not my beautiful wife."

Through the clouds I rose, higher and higher.

"And you may ask yourself, am I right? Am I wrong? And you may tell yourself, My god! What have I done."