

Excerpts—NEW AMERICAN CAFÉ

from Chapter 1

Once there was, in the story of America, a chapter in all caps, a megathrust event, more an era than a decade, known as the nineteen-sixties. Although I was a child of the era, as a son of the South, the slumbering otherland, I came late to the party. Seven years into the seventies, I was still burning the fuel of the decade's dreams and visions, lofty to lunatic.

It may not have been the true reason. But it was the nearest excuse I had for arriving at these coordinates in space and time, in a city too cold for human habitation, on the lip of a frozen lake. A predisposition maybe, but not the true reason. That was the bitter recognition as I put the Mustang in park and rotated the key to off.

I grabbed the hot box and rolled out and the wind bit again. You could burn your lungs inhaling. A leather bomber jacket made a flimsy defense, no matter how high you zipped it. Melville may have had drizzly November in his soul, but he never felt December in Chicago. I punched the door lock and checked the handle.

The recognition took a human form. And it was the human form, mortal muse, lethal pixie, that I had in mind, in gut, in incessant thoughts like an El train running in the brain. The form of Melanie.

"Bitch," I said to no one there, focusing down my long tunnel of jealousy and grief. I crunched in the snow dune before the sidewalk and almost blundered into them. One look and there was no doubt. They had heard me.

from Chapter 4

Pat Tremaine is wearing her hair up. Her lipstick is an eye-catcher, and her gown, attire appropriate to a prom, shimmers subtly. We're above ground level, on a hotel mezzanine like a pool of marble, outside a conference room or ballroom.

She takes a sip from her glass, a red plastic tumbler, then lifts it to my mouth. The taste is sweet-tart, like apple wine.

She's standing close, looking bemused in that way she has, as though she knows what I know, and what I'm thinking. I'm feeling the pull of her lips. I lean in.

She takes a step back, and then another. I wonder if I've misread her, but it's about something else, completely different. She's focused past my shoulder, behind me.

Down a long track a train is coming out of pewter light. The floor beneath us is not a mezzanine but a platform, elevated, two sides bisected by tracks. I detect a rumble, and a vibration is beginning under our feet. The El train, green-headed, is closing fast.

The rush and rattle of coupled cars is split by the shriek of steel on steel. It is starting to slow. I don't want to see this train, don't want it to stop for me.

I turn to grab Pat's hand, but she's gone. She has found the stairway down from the platform, the stairway I need.

The train is braking, grinding and screeching. The lead car passes, and I have my first view through the windows. Riders pack the cars from side to side, a number gripping the overhead hooks and rails. They peer through the windows, sullen, leaden-eyed. Palms press against the glass.

And then, like a premonition, the first twists of smoke escape above the window tops. As the cars slow, sending a shudder underfoot, blurred faces come into focus. One makes eye contact—a man in a fur hat, pressed against a window.

In the next car, tongues of orange flame lick out above the glass. Screaming starts. People are jostling, surging to the windows, trapped, pounding on the glass panes of the sliding doors. Orange embers whip into the air above the car tops.

As far as I can see to the end of the train, cars are venting smoke, the riders trapped, windows throbbing with pulses of orange light. The train is groaning, nearly stopped, stopping for me.

from Chapter 15

The moving city was all fascination after dark. Dense parkas were giving way to jackets and coats, female forms emerging out of wraps. Occasional crowds spilled onto sidewalks in pools of light from a movie marquee or nightclub neon on Belmont or Lincoln. Chicago was reimagining itself, a city of light rising again like an invitation, drawing hopefuls from the plains and up the river, schemers and writers and musicians on the make.

The buildings I had menueed were transformed by night. The lighted windows of high-rises looked orderly and magical stacked and set back into stories of sky. Doors I had visited in stealth became doorbells I could press legally or numbers I could give to doormen I had passed earlier that day or on another day, incognito.

The traffic was my element. I rolled with the groan and sigh of buses and complaining horns. There was a jamming, shambling rhythm to it. All the needed notes were there, blended with overtones and undertones. Snatches of tunes and lyrics, motifs and themes, conjoined in instants then dissolved, fleeting but not impossible to capture. Tuning in was all I needed to find the pulse in the shimmering veins of traffic, and that Wray needed to match the rocking, rolling hum to chords and runs on steel strings. Alone in the Mustang with the windows up, I had the time and space for the hidden music to reveal itself, and if it didn't, I could punch my presets, boost the volume, and elevate closer to inspiration. Such were the pluses of driving.

from Chapter 17

“Chicago police!” Duchamp pounded the door with the side of his fist, and it reverberated in the hallway of hollow doors and drumskin walls. The building was not a four-plus-one, but the quality was the same for as many floors as could be crammed into the height limit.

No response. But I had spotted his car in the same block and Hecker confirmed the plate.

Duchamp pounded twice more. “Chicago police!” He let a few beats pass then nodded to his partner.

Hecker was holding a metal wedge the shape of a staple gun. The front tapered into a proboscis, a three-inch pick as thin as a hacksaw blade. He inserted the pick into the dead-bolt lock and squeezed the trigger twice. Then he traded the pick gun for a short rod like an Allen wrench and twisted. The lock turned.

Incomprehensibly, I was in a hallway in a building I had gained access to by Chicago police pressing half a dozen buzzers. We were going to break into the apartment of the driver I had hired in the sane light of day.

Hecker had switched to a flat metal strip thin enough to work in beside the doorknob.

I pictured Kip in the café, yellow jacket, threadbare high-tops. What were the odds he had a gun?

Hecker checked Duchamp who nodded, and Hecker nodded. A turn of the knob and we were in.

“Police!” Duchamp called again into the dark. Hecker’s flashlight came on.

A flashback of light from a mirror. A low table with floor pillows: two crushed Coke cans, soiled paper plates with burned stick matches, and a bong. By the front window, a padded swivel chair heaped with clothes. Between the table and the window, a sofa bed pulled out with rumpled covers and a pair of jeans. Lingering dark scents of incense or spices.

“Hegazy,” Duchamp called. “Shakir.”

The silence brought a perverse sense of relief. Gone, a good try. Did all we could do. But I was denying his undeniable car. A stirring sound on the other side of the wall.

Around the corner Hecker’s light hit a closed door. Duchamp double-knocked and gripped the knob. I was seeing Kip, concealed carry, pocket pistol. Knob turned, unlocked. Door opened inches, caught. Behind Duchamp, Hecker angled the beam into the crack. Duchamp yanked the door shut then shoved it. Again. His gun was out. He shouldered the hollow slab once. In a loud rap and crack of wood the door flew open.

from Chapter 20

*I heard it under the beards of the trees
like a brushing of bodies
in the corridors of sleep*

It was only my voice in the mike, and I hoped no one else could hear the quaver. The chatter broke off and pockets of laughter fell silent.

*I rose and followed, heel to toe,
stalking the voice of a reticent animal,
so rare as to be beautiful*

I caught the sudden stares, a captive audience interrupted by what they were hearing, by whatever it was that I was doing. I spotted the eyes I was looking for.

I would have been the first

*to find it beyond the cloaks of the trees
but at the edge of the clearing
you were there before me*

Then I was chording the intro and John came in with me and ratcheted up, overlaying the same chords, and the sound caromed off the brick walls and dumpster steel, and I took a breath.

*Something in an outlaw knows an outlaw in disguise
Heat settled on the city and the darkness hid your eyes
I was targeting her, tuning her in, trying to connect.
You could say that we did not hear voices call our names
down where the waters flow
but only you would know*

Wray was off and rolling and no one could stand still. Anita was drawing closer, little by little, wine cup gone, looking surprised, maybe even charmed.

*You always wore your white lace to go living on the lam
Now you wear your traveling dress in the port of Amsterdam
John was high on the back-court resonance, mixing licks with my fat seventh chords.
I could say that you made me as free as I will be
Free enough to let you go
And only you would know.*

We finished to polite applause and hoots from our people, half of the other drop-ins not sure what we had put them through. Anita was standing away from the poets in the middle of the crowd, twenty feet in front of me. She applauded with the others but then only regarded me straight-on, half smiling, as though she was seeing me for the first time. I was pizza boy no longer, and that was all I wanted.

from Chapter 23

Through him was the one thought, fold arms and drive. Think all the way through him like a fastball through the catcher. Straight through between the shoulder blades. Drive block. He never heard me.

My face flattened into his coat, mildew and smoke. It felt like ramming a padded wall, but the wall did give.

The Russian pitched forward and I rolled over and past him, taking the asphalt on my arm and shoulder. He dropped to his hands and knees but that was all. It had been my one clear shot.

Donny and the cap were staring, stunned. One of Donny's arms was free.

"Run!" I choked out, fighting for breath.

He twisted loose and made one clear stride but the cap lunged at him, tackling around the thighs, and they both went down. Donny beat at him but the cap tucked his head, face buried in Donny's legs. I knew I could kick him free.

The Russian swiveled on his knees. Spotted me, huffing and empty-faced, black-eyed, roused like a bull, a pick in his hump. Rolling on my side, gaining my feet. I broke for Donny and the cap. The Russian came at me but I was fifteen feet from them, twenty at most. A gloss of blood on Donny's mouth. Impact at my shoulder, stiff-arm. On one foot, canting sideways.

Canting, like football. I could do it, I knew in the long slow second. Displacement game, game of off-center. Spin to footing. Get a hand down and break the fall. But the asphalt flew up. Padded only by jacket, shoulder hit, arm compressed ribs, breath gone. I rolled onto knees, gasping, chest not working. Pushing up from knees, bent and coughing. Donny had kicked free, glint of his silver chain.

Head hanging, dark shoes on the periphery, coming like animal shadows, predatory. In the fog-filtered moonlight, in the blink before impact I caught the sheen of knuckles, not brass but stainless steel.

The slug on the jaw, a snapping sound below the ear. A swinging thread of saliva, string of light. Brain jam. Still standing, head lolling back to take him in. Tuck head, hands up. But arms were dead weight. No time.

from Chapter 24

Dec. 19

We don't see it--Corey or John, Melanie or Anita, or any of the rest of us--but we're in a suspension here, dark and deep. Predators rise to take the unwise, or the unwary, or the weak. The Donnys and the Kips--we seldom see them, much less lose them.

The omnivorous city that is like its great lake that is like an ocean takes it all in. It dwarfs and humbles and can absorb anything, as it absorbed Donny. As it could absorb us and reduce us if we're careless in our little time slice, our frangible moment, the city with its crushing depths and layers of time and vastness.

Donny was here among us, now not. Who was he besides our experiences of him now past--his X factor, my envy, the father of Vicky's kid, beep-beep, the would-be entrepreneur purveyor of intoxicants ecstatic and sad? It's as though he both was and was not at once, as though what we knew of him or thought we knew was all of him, our story of Donny, both splendid in our memories and empty as his place on Larrabee.

from Chapter 27

The only voice left in the room was mine. The chatter had dwindled to held breath. Dale's triplets, asynchronous like Wray's, sounded over the room, the room in suspension.

For whom time has no meaning

Whom no promise binds

Sustain the tacet. Another beat. Flat pick signature, down-up, down-up, filled the mike.

No bridge off the island, men here let it fall

Sea birds on the pilings till they hear the ocean call

Coleman's conga came in at my side, a rhythm and a pulse like a human pulse, like a hand on my shoulder. Dale's lead felt its way in, answering my vocal, twining around it. He was taking off from Wray's, but it was clearly his own, riding the Fender's twang tone.

The set flowed, holding together, a medley of numbers linked each to each, as John and I had conceived it. That Coleman and Dale had learned by playing with the tape was a new high, a validation like the ethereal broadcast at New Trier. I was picking out faces from the boosting front tables back to the samovar. We seemed to be holding the room. The charge of playing a full set for the first time was powering us along, and we were starting to trust enough to riff, but not too much.

As we led into the closer, I took the first verse of "Peace on the Sea" alone. Coleman switched to the snare and set up a stately, ghostly pace with a brush and one stick. Dale stayed with his fiddle on the verses but kept the Fender strapped on, punched the volume, and tore into a break, tormenting the Strat. It glimmered like mainline adrenaline, and I was sure everyone felt it. On the last verse, Coleman double-timed on the snare and Dale joined me on the vocal mike for the final chorus. The room was cut loose and rising, suspended in the pure seconds that anybody plays for. We struck the last chord and let it carry and hung on the silence. Always too long but longer this time. Did they hate it? We had done all we could do.