

# Prologue

## **Federal Penitentiary, Beaumont, Texas**

My wife asks me what I think about. And, of course, I say I think about her. I do, actually. But, to be totally truthful – and that's the standard I've now set for myself – it happens only at night. She is the mooring in my mind when I'm feeling buffeted by my memories, when the loneliness peaks and I'm lashed by disappointment at the way things turned out.

During the day, my thoughts are less disordered and pace off in a very different direction. Not always, of course, given my assigned work and the rest of my daily routine, but often enough to feel as if they've become familiar companions. Like Chaucer's assembly, they each bring me a unique perspective on our journey toward a common

destination. Their individual vantage points are like shafts of consciousness that illuminate this space or that but never merge into a general clarity. They reveal the truth, but not the sum of what can be known. That's what I'm after: a perfect number of understanding – a positive comprehension – of what brought me to this place in my life. And no less important, how it did so.

That's not as egocentric as it may at first sound – I've seen and experienced enough to know I'm not alone. There are others, many others in fact, who are careening recklessly toward the very same end. They too have felt the insistent pull of gateway luxuries, the unrelenting pressure of trying to keep up with, or better yet, visibly ahead of one's contemporaries. And just as I did, they fell into our miasma of self-celebration and indulgence, and now they're unable to stop their full-headed rush into depravity.

So, yes, there is a Minetta Brook of egocentricity in my quest to apprehend what happened to me, but there is a more communal aspect to it, as well. I believe, or at least I hope that by observing my story, some of those who are now well on their way to repeating it will change their course. My way took me into a cold and desolate place – it numbed my soul and cut me off from my

patrimony – and I want to prevent anyone else from having to endure such a self-inflicted trauma.

My story, however, is not some Faustian tale. If so many others are walking in my footsteps or on the brink of doing so, then my experience isn't some individual moral lesson; it's the symptom of a national disorder. It is an affliction that's destroying the lives of countless Americans. They are innocent – or more accurately, not guilty – but like the zombies that are so popular in books and movies these days, they have been sucked into committing terrible, violent acts against the rest of us.

The horrific toll this behavior exacts is on display in big cities and small towns, in well-heeled neighborhoods and hard-edged projects – the hurt is visible everywhere, yet inexplicably, it remains unmitigated and untreated. We collect vast troves of data about ourselves, but can't perceive our essential condition. We know more about the state of our species than ever before, and consciously or unconsciously, we ignore what we have learned. That's what's most insidious about the whole situation: we've made ourselves blind to the damage it's doing to us.

To understand me, therefore, I have to understand us first. My perspective, I admit, is less than perfect. I live in this country, but I've released my grip on the idea of it – I've relinquished my claim to the kinship that defines and substantiates its intrinsic character. I've grabbed hold of its opportunity and chased its dream, but pushed away its obligations and stepped on its rules. I've reveled in what it enabled me to do and where it allowed me to go, but never once worried about whether I was defacing that passage for others. I have leaned on its freedoms and relied on its resources, but never thought to protect or care for them. I am an American, but I fully acknowledge that I have been out of touch with America and remain so.

Though that separation aches like an arthritic joint, I can still feel a reverence for this land of my forefathers. To me, America is and always will be an exceptional nation. Not just special, but one-of-a-kind – a place that has attracted and nurtured more of humankind than any other country in history. Yes, yes I know, in these cantankerous times, there are plenty of pundits who dispute that claim, but I don't much credit their view. To me, they are the money changers of America's sacred temple. They survive only because the

people's faith – their sure sense of who they are even in the face of our disorder – is strong enough to tolerate them.

This exceptionalism doesn't make America a city upon a hill or even a light shining brightly in the darkness. Rather, it is expressed in human touches, as countless gestures of goodwill offered wherever they are needed. Admittedly, it is sometimes done to further a national interest, but far more often – though far less remembered – its goal and its imperative is simply to help, to offer a hand to others, whether they are like us or not. America is exceptional because it has codified, holds aloft the torch for and most importantly, strives to live up to the ideals of our common ancestry. It is imperfect as all human communities are, but it is also a perennial of generosity and kindness, indefatigably rushing to aid those stricken by hurricanes and economic misfortune at home and typhoons and tyrants abroad.

As extraordinary as its almost daily expression of altruism may be, however, America is even more exceptional for what it does not do. It is indisputably the world's sole super power – it is, without hyperbole, the mightiest nation the world has ever known – yet it does not seek to conquer territory, impose a religion on another people

or control the expression of their opinions and beliefs. It will not tolerate threats to its wellbeing and strikes ferociously at those who attack it, yet is magnanimous in victory and an exemplar of reconciliation. America can be loud, profane, irreverent and even irresponsible, but it is also a place where human vitality is cherished, human advancement is championed, and human achievements are revered.

So, how did such a country produce so many men and women like me – citizens of America who now live and work without its values? How did a place that is spontaneously giving create a segment of its population that is rapaciously greedy and ethically hollow? What caused a nation that champions a dream for all to breed a caste of young and old who cherish only that which gives them pleasure, advantage, status, or just a momentary thrill? What caused this nation of the people, by the people and for the people to accept a social class defined not by its goodness, but by its absolute indifference to the fate of other human beings?

Are these aberrant Americans just another expression of ...

# Chapter 1

July, 1963

Venice, Italy

“It’s our turn, man.”

I had no idea what he meant by that, so I bought myself some time by looking out the picture windows set above the red leather banquette that ran the length of the far wall. A row of sleek, black gondolas bounced up and down in the blue and green chop of the Grand Canal. A water taxi slowly chugged across the broad estuary taking its passengers from the train station to the watery curb at St. Mark’s Square. A trail of birds weaved a tapestry of faint specks behind the boat, waiting for a handout from some generous traveler on board. As it always did, the languid pace of the waterborne traffic seemed to dampen my mind’s irritating swings between confidence and confusion, leaving

me feeling a little of both but captive of neither.

Despite its reputation as the watering hole of celebrities and celebrated authors, Harry's Bar is a narrow, pinched room. The tables opposite the banquette push out into the center aisle – the only transit way from front to back – so that those sitting on the outside are jostled anytime more than a single person walks by. It was as if old Harry or whoever it was who actually owned the place wanted to remind the patrons that they were but the tolerated guests of a venue intended for greater personages.

I looked back at the fellow standing next to me. “Okay, but ... well, our turn for what?”

I winced inwardly at how naïve the question sounded. I am, after all, a high school senior living with my family in Verona, Italy. My father is an officer in the American Army, assigned to an artillery outpost the U.S. maintains in that ancient Roman crossroads. We are a small colony – there are just 52 kids in our class at the high school on post – and we spend a lot of summer days and school year weekends roaming the frontier beyond our gates. We are foreigners in an unfamiliar land, exploring



the parallax between its ancient legacy and our modern yet still undefined generation.

That's how I came to be standing in Harry's ordering a liter of house red for my friends and me. We had hopped the 7:30 morning train heading east with our paninis from the station café and a couple of guitars for a day of wandering around the canals and alleyways of the old City of Dreams. We had made the trip often enough that my parents didn't think twice when I told them about it the night before. Just be home before eight, my father had admonished. Your mother and I have a cocktail party to go to, and we need you to babysit. So, my day with the doges would end with my sister and her dolls, but as I listened to the happy chatter effervescing around me, the tradeoff seemed fair.

I had been the last to slide into our seats along the wall, so the break between our table and the next was directly in front of me, and that opening represented the closest pathway to the bar. "We'll have a liter of your finest table wine," Brè had declared with theatrical hauteur and nodded at me as if to dispatch a servant. I was happy to get the wine, but being on the receiving end of his imperious tone in front of Kate bothered me. I thought about refusing his command, but

decided that playing along was the better way to stake out my independence.

I stood up and clicked my heels theatrically. “Yes sir, General, sir,” I replied with as much exaggerated humility as I could muster. Without waiting for a reply – and, I admit, to dodge any clever riposte from Bré – I stepped briskly across the aisle to place our order. It was probably my imagination, but I felt as if Kate was measuring my reaction to Bré’s challenge, and I wondered what her conclusion would be.

I had a crush on her, but hadn’t been able to work up the courage to ask her out. It was weird because I’d never been shy or nervous around girls before, but somehow Kate was different, and I was unsure how to begin. She had wispy, reddish-blond hair that fell to her shoulders and just the hint of a southern accent, which softened her voice but not her opinions. The girl was, without a doubt, the prettiest and most confident person I had ever met.

She wasn’t the first to raise her hand in class – she didn’t compete that way or try to be a showoff – but if she did get called on, she always seemed to have a fully formed answer to whatever question the teacher had asked. I couldn’t tell if she was just quick on her feet or had actually thought about Holden

Caulfield or the digestive system of a frog, but however she did it, her articulate responses were the black to my white of half-formed thoughts and stuttering classroom comments. It left me mad about her and mad at myself for being so slow on the uptake and totally tongue-tied – the demons that always seemed to go to class with me.

Kate's best friend was sitting next to her. We all called her Dani, but her name was actually Daniella. If Kate had strong opinions, Dani had equally strong emotions. I chalked them up to her Italian heritage. Her mother had met and married her father when he was stationed in Trieste after World War II. Dani's short height, swarthy complexion and raven black hair were the proscenium for the pyrotechnics of her personality. She wept at sad movies, guffawed at even bad jokes and shook with rage when the military police occasionally mistook her for an Italian visitor and stopped her at the front gate to post. It was more than most of the guys at school could handle, so she was always a part of our crowd, but usually without someone special.

Sitting next to Dani was Bré Simmons, my best friend since the first day of school our sophomore year. His given name was David, but everyone called him Bré. It was short for Hombré, an honorific denoting that he was

*the man* in our class. He could have been class president, but said that petty politics were beneath him. He had an old fashioned, two-handed set shot that was deadly from the top of the key, but couldn't be bothered to play on our school basketball team. He wasn't the best looking, the smartest or even the best dressed kid in the school, but he had this swaggering nonchalance that made him seem a step ahead of the rest of us.

So, Bré was the guy everyone looked up to. He was our acknowledged leader, but to me, he was a whole lot more. He was the brother I had always wanted. I shared secrets with him and knew they were safe. I talked with him about stuff that was important to me, about whether I would measure up as the first person in my family to go to college or what it would be like to get drafted and sent off to some Army post on the other side of the world, and never had to worry about being exposed or made to look stupid. We didn't always agree – in fact, we were often at loggerheads – but Bré was the one person I knew I could count on whatever we were doing, and I was determined to be the same for him.

Both Dani and Bré could play the guitar and had great voices – at least that's what my teenage ears told me. They were the

troubadours of our class, and any day you spent with them outside of school would always include a pickup concert. Whether it was just we four or a larger group, a spot would be chosen in the elbow of an old palace or beside a piazza fountain, the rest of us would form a tribal circle around them, and Dani and Bré would take us through their repertoire. I liked whatever they sang, but *Where Have All the Flowers Gone?* and a new one they had just learned called *Blowin' in the Wind* were definitely my favorites.

On this trip, we had begun our day as we always did by taking the water taxi to St. Mark's Square. The promenade was busy, so

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