

"Truly wonderful. The searing romantic/political/artistic triangle at the book's center movingly evokes the delirious Santa Cruz garden of my youth. I loved it."

– David Talbot, author of *The Devil's Chessboard* and *Season of the Witch*

Richard M. Ravin

Nothing
to
Declare
a novel



Nothing to Declare



RICHARD M. RAVIN



16 doors press

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For Daniel

When a man thinketh on any thing whatsoever, His next
Thought after, is not altogether so casuall as it seems to be.

—Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*

Dead men are heavier than broken hearts.

—Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep*

ONE

1990

HE'D PROMISED TO GET THERE BEFORE DARK. Mrs. Folari wasn't comfortable opening her door to strangers, not in February—the month was devoted to bad luck. But Jesse was lost and he was losing the light. His knuckles gripped the wheel more tightly with every passing block. At the smallest tap of his foot, the rented Lincoln surged forward. The thing knew where it wanted to go, even if he hadn't a clue.

He watched for street signs out of the corner of his eye. He could be anywhere, Everett, maybe, or Medford, someplace on the edge of what he remembered. Maybe he'd crossed in and out of Somerville already, its expressways and rotaries named after Korean War dead, the tiny red, white, and blue memorial flags. He couldn't tell; L.A. and its grid, its easts and wests, had bled every curve from memory.

At a blinking red light he paused and scratched at the ice on the inside of the side window: empty, windblown sidewalks and a magazine stand shilling the lottery, a muffler shop on the corner, a street sign so covered with snow he could read only the last three letters, LEY ST. Seventy-five degrees when he'd left Santa Monica this morning and the acacias in full blossom. The lanes of the Palisades had been carpeted in yellow.

The street lights popped on and lit a row of dun-colored houses with stained cars in their drives. In the middle

of the block, a man dragged his garbage can to the street and propped it against a heap of snow and gravel. Before he reached his door, a gust blew the can over and spilled chicken bones and Sunday supplements. The man pivoted, the wind ballooning his overcoat, his mittened hands balled into fists. Another pivot and he stomped inside his house. The Christmas lights on his door flashed on.

Somerville, Jesse was sure of it. Marty had come back here to live, had been here for the last fourteen years, if that could be believed. Marty had hated the place, hell, they'd hated it together. Jesse steered the Lincoln carefully around the corner; a boat this big, no point chancing a ding. LEY meant DOOLEY, he hoped. The street where Marty lived. Had lived.

The phone had surprised him at 4:30 in the morning two nights before, a stranger's voice drilling into his sleep. A landlady, Mrs. Folari, her teary news delivered with broad, Boston A's and no respect for time zones. Marty had died. There'd been an accident in New Hampshire; he'd hit a deer. He'd been drinking, she whispered. Yes, Jesse'd said, thinking—of course. The landlady repeated herself. Marty was gone and Jesse was wanted.

Number fifteen was a shingled three-decker, indistinguishable from the ones on either side. The car balked as Jesse parked in front, the snow groaning under the tires, but he didn't shut off the engine until the Lincoln was parallel. The doorbell he chose had a mourning ribbon draped over a green holly wreath, the faded black satin showing good service. In this neighborhood, mourning was seldom out of season. Marty Balakian, it was his turn tonight. Jesse announced his name to the sliver of a cracked-open door.

The landlady welcomed him in and sat Jesse on her chintz settee, pressing on him cold cuts, pickled vegetables, and

homemade anisette. She was just under five feet tall with a heavy sweater over her black dress, in her eighties, he guessed, and she performed her duties well-rehearsed by experience, almost gleeful to have someone to share her trouble with. On the wall behind her, a gilt-framed Jesus presided over the Folari living room.

“Mr. Kerf. Please. Take as much as you want; I made the pepperoncini special. He was a good boy.”

For a moment, it wasn't clear what the woman meant. “You're talking about Marty,” Jesse said.

The landlady's pupils swam behind the round lenses of her glasses. “Naturally, Mr. Balakian. My son was worried—an Armenian. He had a good face, I always go by that, and he paid on the dot every month. He shoveled the walk, you understand. A good boy, like I said.” The landlady took up some knitting and watched Jesse poke at his antipasto.

A good boy—boy of fifty-two, strung out on booze and probably two or three other things, if Marty had kept to character. A good boy was hardly how he would want it.

“I'm still confused why it was me you called,” Jesse said. “I haven't been in contact with Marty for longer than I like to remember. Since the time we were living in California.”

“California. I've seen it in the pictures. Now I listen to the television. They have it too, the palm trees and everything. Your friend, to go so young, no children, no wife, no nothing, a waste. But he made you next of kin, the lawyer told me. I say, okay, let me take care of the telephone. You don't want bad news from a lawyer.” She rummaged in her pocket, showed him a business card. “Mr. Lieb. Like you. Jewish.”

Jesse took the card, touched the embossed printing with his fingertip. Mrs. Folari's mouth tensed with expectation. It

was Jesse's turn now, and she was hoping for what—questions, reminiscences, the common territory of the bereaved? He thought of one of the last times he'd seen his friend, Marty in his black denim jacket and jeans and the cowboy boots he was never without. He was smoking reefer and peeling artichokes while wearing headphones that played a wild arpeggio by Ornette Coleman, the stereo cable trailing from kitchen to living room. As he trimmed and cut and rubbed with lemon, Marty did a shuffling dance step where he stood, and sang a kind of harmony in his lovely high tenor.

Mrs. Folari was waiting and Jesse felt compelled to offer something. "Marty was happy here, I take it?"

The landlady looked surprised. "Mr. Kerf. As far as I know, only the cows are happy."

Jesse took up his plate and considered the specks of fat in a slice of mortadella. "He was happy in California," he said.

The upstairs apartment was unlit, and the landing fixture brightened an uninviting sweep of vestibule Jesse hesitated to cross. From down below rose the sound of laughter, TV laughter in love with itself, the sound manufactured, no doubt, not far from where he lived. A pile of yellowed newspapers blocked the threshold. Jesse stepped over them and closed the door behind him.

His vision refused to adjust to the darkness—nothing, an exuberant blackness, the hiss of the radiators. The room was busy with odors: damp paper and, from farther away, cooking grease and smoke. The strongest layer was of sweat. This was instructive. Marty's stink had outlived him.

When Jesse found the lights, the brightness startled him, a blast of halogen from a long ceiling track. The taste of anisette came slick against his teeth. He hadn't prepared himself for what he'd find.

The living room was similar to Mrs. Folari's in size, but the comparison ended there. It contained a collection of books and nothing else. *Collection* wasn't the right word, though. There were too many to count, too many for anyone to read, the metal bookcases arranged like overstuffed library stacks. The aisles ran wall to wall, shelves of black enamel, gunmetal gray, and army green, the colors of industry. The room was empty otherwise, no furniture, no carpet over the painted floor, the plaster walls blank but for the glossy dome of a thermostat and the imprints of whatever pictures had once passed for decoration.

Jesse's eye flew across the book jackets, the spill of lettering, the shiny paper covers: American history, psychology, film studies, earth science, biography, feminist theory. Marty's imagination and interest had neglected nothing. Six banks of shelving supported eight levels each, and each of these ran the full length of the room, twelve feet or more. The metal bowed at the center from the weight. The man's canon had not changed: what's good in moderation is better in excess.

A large volume on the nearest bottom shelf displayed pages of blaring color, the human anatomy, male—standing, sitting, anterior, and posterior views. In one illustration, the corded muscles were exposed and the veins and arteries branched in a dreadful tangle. Its palms-outward posture echoed Mrs. Folari's Jesus—except for the arrogant rictus smile. We are all sinners here.

A memory surfaced of an evening when Jesse was 19. Johnny's Foodmaster on North Beacon, was it there still? Dog days, early September 1972, it would have to be. Jesse's legs shake, the dollar in his hand shakes, his bell bottoms tremble against his shins; surely the clerk can hear. A jar of capers travels down the rubber belt. Through a slit in his shirt pocket—a guayabera worn expressly for this—Jesse clutches against his belly fifteen dollars' worth of veal. The cool cellophane of the package sticks to his skin, conveys a vigorous sense of wrong. On the other side of the automatic doors, Marty's Volvo runs in the parking lot, the red eye of a cigarillo hot behind the windshield.

"Mark this, Little Brother," Marty says later, while he sprinkles lemon zest on the smoking veal. "The best ingredients, you can't buy them, they're not for sale. Look at the pan, you see veal and capers, a hit of lemon—that's base metal. They're nothing, they're meaningless. But fear and greed—stir in the big emotions and you get a dish that stands for something."

Jesse waits at the ready, pours vermouth in the pan at Marty's nod. "You see dinner," Marty says, tasting from the skillet with a hairy thumb. "I see fucking transcendence."

Jesse walked to where he'd set down his coat. The sleeves of his sweater had picked up a patina of dust, and he brushed himself off before he put it on. A week at least, he thought, to box the books, sell them, or give them away. Perhaps he would hire the work out. Who could he hire, though, to explain what had delivered Marty to his current—and final—obsession?

Jesse sighted down the hall toward the bedroom and, beyond it, the kitchen. No. He'd come in daylight; it would be

easier in the light, it would have to be. As he left, Jesse lowered the temperature to sixty-two. The radiator hiss cut off and silence followed him out the door.

Snow had fallen, thick, sudden flakes that covered his car. He moved the Lincoln into traffic, feeling the engine through the sole of his shoe. What was it for skids, steer with or against? On the McGrath-O'Brien, a line of plows slanted along the roadway. They rolled at a decorous pace and left a gap on the right so cars could pass, yet Jesse stayed to their rear. Where the tips of their blades hit pavement, sparks flew into the sky. He drove to his hotel in a trail of fire.

TWO

OVER THE PHONE, JESSE BEGGED the lawyer's indulgence. He was sitting on his hotel bed fresh from the downstairs gym, sweat cooling on his skin. Could they find a way to zip through the legal business as quickly as possible so he could fly home before his business imploded? "My chef goes into meltdown if I ignore her for too long," Jesse said.

"Don't I know," Lieb said. "I go to the Cape five minutes, and my shop starts to stink like week-old tuna. Problem is, I'm on the fly, chum, depositions all day. Gotta set us up for tomorrow, 1 P.M., how'd that be?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"You could go fuck yourself." Lieb laughed at this. "Oh yeah," he said, "Tillton and Sons, I almost forgot. Near Ellsworth, wherever the hell that is. They're waiting for your call. My girl has the number."

"Tillton and Sons? What's that?"

Dead air, Lieb put him on hold. Jesse weighed the receiver in his hand. Owning the restaurant had taught him the intricacies of phone warfare—hanging up on hold announced your weakness, it lacked finesse. He brought the plastic to his cheek where it cooled his stubble.

The secretary came on and gave him a number, which Jesse wrote on the margin of the room-service menu. 603, that was

New Hampshire. Tillton and Sons, the idea seeped into him, was a funeral home. He carried the phone to the window and dialed the number, making an appointment for that afternoon.

The Charles lay two stories below, and by the banks a pair of runners paced the river. They pushed plumes of vapor in front of their masked faces as they ran through the brittle sunlight, their mouths open as if in surprise.

Fifteen years before, Jesse had run along the river course with Marty at the helm. Never in winter, though; winter was for fanatics. Their idea had been to run for pleasure, chasing the neural high. Jesse closed the shade.

The trip to New Hampshire passed through the industrial towns south of the White Mountains. The black car against the ice-white road, landscape of abandoned brick mill yards, churches that advertised bean suppers and bingo, boarded-up hot-dog shacks. Jesse kept one hand on his radio buttons and changed stations as they faded. FM here went in for power pop and metal. He boosted the volume until the dashboard hummed.

Three times he saw New Hampshire troopers giving out tickets. The taillights and bubble tops syncopated in violent blue, designed to quiver the heart. Good fortune can be willed, Marty once had told him. It's a matter of focus, you put your mind right and let go. Jesse had lacked a hopeful outlook, had refused the positive view. Now, as each tableau of car and cop swelled into sight, he leaned on the gas as hard as he was able. The Lincoln flew.

He passed Tillton and Sons twice before he realized he'd mistaken it for a residence. It was on the outskirts of

Ellsworth, where the town street changed to rural blacktop, a three-story Greek Revival with a small placard at the head of the long drive and a columned portico at the entrance. A sound of sobbing washed in muted waves from behind the front door while Jesse rang the bell and stamped his snowy feet on the mortuary doormat. “Welcome,” the thing said, in large black letters.

He waited under the portico for an answer, shoving his scarf deeper into his collar, but the sorrow built and built with no hint of release. He rang again. Nothing. When he could think of no reason to return to his car, Jesse straightened his coat and let himself inside.

Within the large foyer a young woman was simultaneously bawling, smoking a cigarette, and attempting to pull a down jacket from a coat rack. Jesse couldn’t turn away from her: her red face and bitten nails, grief carved into the hollows in her cheeks. How would it feel to hold her in his arms?

The woman apparently had put herself together in a hurry because her blouse was misbuttoned and her shirttails bunched at her waist. Amazing, the energy with which she rammed her arms into her jacket sleeves, shifting her cigarette from hand to hand. Jesse felt his face go red in embarrassment. His own loss had grown shamefully thin in comparison.

A man appeared in the hall, a middle-aged fellow in a proper black suit. His gait had a professional steadiness and he wore a small, pale rose in his lapel. He cooed—shh, shh—and his white hands stretched in comfort toward one and all. But the woman backed away from him and spat directly in his face as he drew near, derailing his motion. “Fuck you and fuck your shitty secretary job,” she said. “Fuck this entire fucking

place.” The man’s jaw worked silently as he wiped away the saliva dripping down the bridge of his nose.

The woman stormed the doorway where she halted and swept her arm across the entry table, scattering black-bordered leaflets to the floor. “See this, it’s me leaving.”

In final farewell, she stamped out her cigarette into the Persian runner and blew both of them a kiss goodbye.

Jesse realized he was clenching his fists as if her insults were directed at him. This was his first Christian funeral parlor—maybe hysteria was in long supply, even among employees. On closer observation, the director was much younger than he’d guessed, not too far out of his teens. Jesse was going to get everything wrong, it seemed. He took on the uncomfortable notion that he would be the one expected to lend solace.

“Not your most perfect day,” he said. He gave the undertaker his name.

“Candace,” the man sighed. “My assistant. I had to let her go, language, lateness, and so forth. No excuse for it. She has a troubled spirit, as you might guess.” The man’s attention looked past him to the spot where Candace had kissed the air goodbye.

He turned back to Jesse. “Yes. For Mr. Balakian. Good of you to come. Please, my apologies. James Tillton.” The man extended a hand, noticed the glaze of spit on his fingers and let them drop. “My sincere condolences on your loss.” Tillton’s breath, Lord help him, smelled of peanut butter.

They went to the sales office, where the undertaker sat behind a writing table and filled out a printed form while Jesse inspected the several coffins fanned out between door and sitting area. He passed his hand over the glistening surface of one, warm from the overhead bulb. His fingertips left a smear.

Perhaps it was the overheated room, but when it was time to conclude his business, Jesse found himself unsteady on his feet, and he sat gratefully and poised Tillton's fat Mont Blanc over the document. It was hard to settle on any line in particular, though the word *DECEDENT* was repeated with nasty frequency. "What is this?" Jesse asked.

"Sorry, I thought you understood. Our agreement, Mr. Kerf. Goods and services. I've learned over the years to dispense with the business side first. Puts a perspective on it. I find that important."

"Perspective," Jesse said. "That's what I like. The whole panorama."

Tillton brought out some full-color brochures and asked Jesse what kind of ceremony he wanted.

"Ceremony? None. No ceremony. Marty won't care about a ceremony."

"Without explicit instructions, we can never speak for the deceased, Mr. Kerf. What we provide, then, is for the living."

"No ceremony."

"The casket?" Tillton's gaze alighted on a dark brown number to Jesse's left. Jesse appraised the eager tilt of the man's chin. He shook his head. No casket.

Tillton's eyelids flickered briefly. Cremation was a perfectly acceptable alternative. They had a selection of urns for every wallet.

"Mr. Tillton. Give me what's simplest. What's easiest. No muss, no fuss."

"The least expensive, I imagine?"

Jesse found a place to sign and scrawled his name. "Exactly. I knew my friend. Unless you do Viking funerals on

Lake Winnepesaukee, I'm sure he'd want me to spend my money on some single malt and raise a glass and nothing more.

Tillton slid the form back, made a few notations, the jaw in motion. "A simple cremation. Plain container, \$1,300. You may pick up the cremains in the morning.

Jesse rose, stumbling slightly. His foot had fallen asleep and he knocked it sharply against the table leg. A little pain was good for the system, the flare along the nerves.

"Payment in advance, if you don't mind," Tillton said.

"Will you take a California check?"

The undertaker sniffed and informed him that checks were not permitted. Credit cards, however, were perfectly all right, and while Jesse signed the slip, the undertaker brought up the subject of a showing.

"A showing?"

"Thought you might want to say goodbye to your friend. It's not required, of course. All right if you decline. Some don't have the stomach for it."

"No. A showing. That sounds good."

The coffin next to Jesse shone with lemon oil. He remembered the smell from his childhood and his mother's constant campaign to keep their house agleam. The image of Jesse's face bent around the curving wood. "Let's go," he said. "Let's have our showing." He tried a step toward the door and found his foot no longer tingled.

Marty's face was the faded umber of old piano ivory. It rested on a field of mauve silk, and the mouth revealed a thoughtful pose, lips slightly apart, a hint of teeth. Keeping a

secret, perhaps, or hiding a lie. The late afternoon sun gilded the features with a rosy bloom. Life in death, so the Bible promised.

Jesse edged his chair a few inches nearer to the coffin. Marty's hair was absurdly lustrous, blacker than he remembered, falling in curls that seemed to billow against the silk. Jesse leaned in. The interior was doused with perfume that overlaid but could not mask Marty's own rich aroma, the harsh animal scent of death. The smell was dense and provocative and offered a reminder: end of the day, we turn to trash.

Jesse waited for the overall picture to disengage into its individual parts, a trick from his time as an art major, a concentration of the eye. In such a state he'd stare at the model for an hour and tease the body out of the lines his pencil made, considering volume and space alone. His favorite had been Greta, a blonde.

A glint moved across the coffin's brass fittings. Dark soon, the same wintry emptiness he'd driven through last night. The viewing room window gave out onto a vast meadow that was fading from sight with the passage of the sun. It got darker here than in California, was this possible?

Shadows traversed the mahogany sides of the box. The wood was splintered at the bottom edge and mended more than once—a viewing coffin, rented by the hour, used how many times before, ten, twenty, a hundred? The half lid revealed the body down to the top button of its suit where the crossed hands lay against the chest. The shirt cuffs bore tan stains at the rim, used in a previous wearing, he guessed, a package deal with the rental casket. The cowboy boots, Jesse wondered. What had become of Marty's boots?

He grabbed at the closed section of the lid and it flew open with a snap and fell away from his grip. Marty's legs rattled against the sides of the box.

The body was naked from the waist down. The clothing ended a few inches above the belt-line, a bleached dickey beneath a false front of a coat that buckled around the body with elastic straps. Yes—exactly right, a practical solution yet sly, the sort Marty would devise. It did him honor.

A patch of soiled cloth covered the groin, and tea-colored bruises mottled the bottoms of the legs where the blood had settled. A yellow and blue wound in the left side bulged with gauze. The spleen—such a small injury, but enough to bleed out Marty's life. The body was otherwise unmarked, but its feet were bare.

“I come from a long line of carpet thieves and stealers of sheep,” Marty had liked to say, waving his grand Armenian nose in your face as proof. From this angle, Jesse could see the cotton that filled the nostrils. Sometimes the line ends. Jesse closed both coffin doors. Marty Balakian had been his friend and his enemy. Now he was nothing—an artifact, a thing. Jesse would ask about the boots before he left.

THREE

JESSE. HEY, JESSE. Look at him moseying around my kitchen hunting for my coffee. Jet lag and a heavy conscience runs a backhoe through your REM—the man can't do what's needed without some good caffeine. It's in the back cupboard, Little Brother, in an airtight canister, stainless steel, just like I taught you. Bingo, got it first try, you're doing fine. The grinder's in the cabinet to the left. See how the boy still takes my lead? Same as always.

I like the coat—he popped for cashmere, very smooth. And that gray at the temples, those serious lines by the corners of his mouth—Jesse's aged well. Buffed up in L.A., no question. It's a requirement out there, is how I hear it, a necessary element. He makes a good impression. I forgot he was that tall.

He looks tense, though, his neck and shoulders all in knots. It's a mesh of trigger points, the upper back, he's got to be in pain. Too bad—I guess I fucked him up. Hey, Jesse, take care of how you eat and sleep. Stamina is key and you're bound to burn through every ounce before you're done, trust me. It goes with the job description—Next of Kin. You don't have to thank me. De nada.

I used to make him laugh. He needed to—he had a deficiency, a vitamin lack. A bad chromosome. He took a push

or he'd forget he was alive. One time, we laughed for an hour, hardly stopped for a breath.

We were stoned—weren't we always? Stoned quite often in the old days—grass, hash, a merry catalog of alkaloids. Then the old days ended, but a few of us didn't abandon our habits, a few of us bravely ventured on. We saw our duty. Till the '80s. The '80s brought the best of us to our knees. Reagan, Wall Street, don't make me give you the list.

OK, for accuracy's sake, I switched over to bourbon, top-shelf exclusively, Blanton's or Knob Creek. Whiskey's a nice body high—that smoky flavor, a taste of carcinogens at the back of the throat, the tough-guy kick. Bourbon meshed with the '80s, didn't it? Weed, I don't know, I couldn't hack it suddenly. Too much something—excess wattage, maybe, too much particularity when I wanted mush. Look, we're born with how many brain cells? A billion or two, who cares, more than we need. I was pleased to offer the donation and bourbon was happy to receive.

We hadn't made the move to California, Jesse and me, the night we laughed. California was in our future but we didn't know it. We were friends, we hung out—Chinatown lunches, rock shows on the Common, street demos—we attended to the present. Somerville friends, we had that link, local boys.

Jesse was in college at Northeastern. He had a scholarship and took art classes, mooned over the models, as I recall, worried his sweet mom and dad. It was an ugly scene, Northeastern—trolley cars slamming on the rails, and the Huntington Y down the block, its torn-up pool tables, riffraff on the steps eyeing marks as they walked by. Jesse's dorm room was a killer—concrete 180 degrees out all the windows and a fair view of the projects. Moderating the asphalt required a high per-

centage of Jesse being elsewhere, so he slept through lecture halls and ignored Friday night mixers, slid papers under his teachers' doors weeks after they were due. I did my bit as general helpmate and nasty influence. More than a decade I had on the boy—I offered the perspective of years.

The night we laughed, we were at my place in North Cambridge, wasted on black Afghan hash. Two tokes sit on you like two tons. The subject falls onto that guy, that Japanese guy, he was a writer, wasn't he, an actor, too, a movie director? The man was major in Japan. He died—a suicide, but designed with an eye to style, with *élan*. There were many lovely features to that particular demise—disembowelment, beheading, political theory.

Somehow the guy has a private army, so he tries a coup to bring back the Golden Age. Who wouldn't? But naturally, the coup goes sour: hello *seppuku*, hello entrails and decapitation. It was all part of the plan.

Nevertheless, rumor has it the man failed to make a good death, a personal weakness at the finale. The Japanese have criteria, don't they, high expectations, and our guy fumbled. Jesse can't see beyond the failure. For him the writer's poor result defines the event from top to bottom.

I say the specifics aren't important, they're annoying. What we require is right brain only—coup, sword, death, the overall scheme. Jesse refuses, he has to flay the topic inside out, to see what we can learn. OK, I'll play along, I say, let's be Talmudic. There is one question that has me confused. The head, I ask. How many bounces when it hits the floor?

Jesse laughs—it takes him by surprise. He opens his mouth and roars. Laughter swallows him up—it's kind of beautiful to watch, the autonomous nervous system in control. Guess

what: I am laughing too. I can't stop, and neither can he. We laugh until we don't know where we are or who we are or why. One hour. That's how it was—I joked and Jesse laughed. I laughed back.

A good death, Jesse. Don't be too fussy, now.

He was due at Lieb's office in an hour. Jesse foresaw a stack of documents to sign and another check to write. Loss was a business that operated with its own rules and conditions like everything else. The lawyer's growl resounded in Jesse's ear, his gutter mouth, the snort. The morning was destined to try his patience; it would be a form of torture. But afterward there'd be the packing up and selling off and then home free. At the restaurant this moment, Manuel and the boys would be proofing the ciabatta on its second rise.

The box of ashes stood on Marty's kitchen table, fresh from the trunk where it had ridden next to the lizard boots. Cremains—a word for the ages, one the mortician had insisted on repeating as often as possible. Jesse shook the box back and forth and heard a sifting, an indistinct rattle. Marty's smile had gold in it, he remembered. Jesse carried the box from room to room, wondering where it belonged.

In the past, Marty's talk had been full of houses—caves on Crete, palapas on the Sea of Cortez—the houses they'd live in, the women who'd warm their beds and cook them spicy tidbits, experiences like a string of shining pearls. "Tell me where to get in line," Jesse had said. "What do I have to do? I'm packed."

Marty sighed. "We do nothing, we take our time. Fate drives the bus, not us."

Jesse studied himself in Marty's bathroom mirror, his face so white and trembling it seemed his tan had faded in a single day. The world is built on actions, not on fate. Did Marty ever learn?

He brought the box of ashes to the bedroom floor where it caught a stripe of morning light. A stale scent drifted up from Marty's scattered T-shirts and jeans and the mildewed sateen of his quilt, from the window curtains mapped with cobwebs. Coins were tossed in all directions, glints of silver on the dark wood floor. Jesse evened the bed sheets and squared the coverlet into a bundle ready for Goodwill.

He thought it prudent to put together an accounting for the lawyer: kitchen table, three chairs, futon, desk, laptop computer, and of course the books, a list filling less than a page in his Day Runner. The computer was propped on Marty's desk, its screen open and locked on password control. The glass surface reflected ghostly particles of Jesse's movements as though it were keeping him under surveillance.

For now, all that was left was to air out the room, and the draft brought in the homely smells of wood smoke and wash-day chlorine. Marty's view looked out onto a familiar Somerville prospect of backyard clotheslines and snow-caked religious statuary. Above Jesse icicles lined the eave like soldiers. The largest one was broader than his arm at its root and twice as long; its blue-white skin captured the swift motion of clouds.

Jesse hoisted himself onto the sill. Now he discerned the icicle's flaws: veins of sooty black staining every layer. He rapped the ice with a knuckle and it shivered, then Jesse struck again with all his strength. The icicle hurled past as though he'd let fly an arrow. Its broken remnants scattered across six feet of hard-packed snow.

Jesse drove toward Lieb's faster than the roads allowed, and he rechecked Marty's watch to verify the time. The Rolex had been lying in a bowl of ticket stubs and loose change, an Oyster Chronometer worth thousands, just the thing for the driver of a Lincoln. He grunted with pleasure as he admired the lump of calibrated chrome. It was a fake, it had to be. Why hadn't he thought of it before, the fuzzy quality to the logo and a clamminess in how the bracelet pressed onto his skin. If he weren't careful, it would turn him green. At a stop sign, Jesse brought his wrist up to his face and felt against the sensitive flesh of his ear the barest hum.

Sex. Weed. Revolution. Grilled tuna.

Here's Jesse, a good-guy restaurant owner who's got his life just so. Flash L.A. bistro, spiffy BMW, all-white condo with an ocean view. Then comes a bombshell. He's been named next of kin to Marty, the wild man and con artist who used to be his best friend. Never mind that they haven't had a civil word in twenty years. Now, Jesse's forced to reckon with the past he's been running from for more than two decades. Between a long-ago love triangle, a trip that leads from Boston to Bali, and the voice of Marty, who may be dead but can't shut up, Jesse's got a lot to handle. What really went down in the turbulent 1970s, when he and his friends were smashing every rule in sight? Jesse needs to figure out not just who he was, but who he wants to be from now on. It's hard to be a good guy all the time.

Praise for *Nothing to Declare*:

"A masterfully written and intimate examination of friendship and loss; how memory not only recreates but fools us yet again into believing what happened actually happened. Ravin knows all the sacred secrets of his characters. Meet Jesse and Marty. You're in for a wild ride."

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"Richard Ravin offers up an astonishing journey through time and across a variety of landscapes, both external and internal . . . There's just much to love about this book—it's rare to find one that makes you laugh, cry, and see the world differently all in the same chapter. But *Nothing to Declare* does that, and more."

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"Richard Ravin has a poet's ear for language and a firm grasp of plot and character. Anchored in the freewheeling counterculture of 1970s California, the story mixes all kinds of fun, but heartbreak and betrayal are soon to follow. *Nothing to Declare* is about the joys and perils of making it up as you go along. It's a smart and totally engrossing read."

— Louie Cronin, author of *Everybody Loves You Back*

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