

THE EXECUTIONER'S SONG

WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

"The big book no one but Mailer could have dared . . .
Absolutely astonishing."

—JOAN DIDION, *New York Times Book Review*



NORMAN MAILER

WITH A NEW FOREWORD BY
DAVE EGGERS

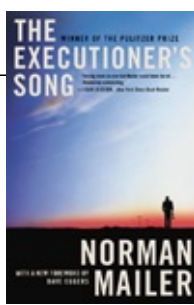
THE EXECUTIONER'S SONG

NORMAN
MAILER



GRAND CENTRAL
PUBLISHING

NEW YORK BOSTON



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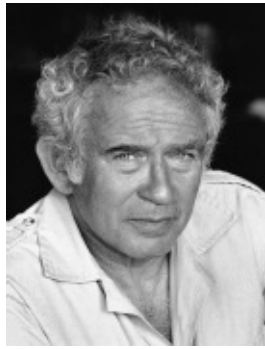
[Table of Contents](#)

[Photos](#)

[Appendix](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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Nancy Crampton

NORMAN MAILER (1923–2007) was born in Long Branch, New Jersey, and grew up in Brooklyn, New York. After graduating from Harvard, he served in the South Pacific during World War II. He published his first book, *The Naked and the Dead*, in 1948. Mailer won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for *Armies of the Night*, and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize again in 1980 for *THE EXECUTIONER'S SONG*. He directed four feature-length films, and was president of the American PEN from 1984 to 1986. *The Time of Our Time*, an anthology of the best of Mailer's writing, was published in May of 1998 to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Mailer's literary debut. In 2005, he won the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters from the National Book Foundation.

“Norman Mailer is a man of wisdom and perception who tells a good story powerfully and well.”
—*The New York Times*

[Foreword](#)

by Dave Eggers

In the event that you've just picked up this book, and know little or nothing about it, and are unsure whether you should read it, I want to urge you with all my being that you must read *The Executioner's Song*. I want to further guarantee that you will finish it. It's the fastest 1,000 pages you will ever know.

It's necessary to say, up front, that whatever you might know or think about Norman Mailer, or whatever you might assume about the man, his work, his personality or his sociopolitical views, none of that information (or misinformation) applies here. This is a story that bears no markings of what we presume to be Mailer's prose style or point of view. *The Executioner's Song* is completely something *other*. Mailer once said that the book was given to him, whole and complete, from God, and it's difficult to argue with that. *The Executioner's Song* cannot be improved. Mailer did not write a better book, and I'm not sure anyone of his generation wrote a better book.

I urge you to read this book without knowing anything more about the story it tells. By now, in 2012, the vast majority of readers new to *The Executioner's Song* will have little to no knowledge about Gary Mark Gilmore, the book's central figure, where he came from, what he did. That is to be expected, and perhaps even embraced for our purposes here. Reading his story without knowing the outcome will only enhance the experience—it gives the book unimaginable tension and scope—and I urge you to read nothing more of this introduction, which will discuss some of the issues the book raises and will reveal too much. Come back to these pages only after you've read the book, if you come back to them all.

When *The Executioner's Song* was published, Gary Gilmore was as well-known in the United States as any film star or athlete. Now, in 2012, very few people under fifty would be able to identify Gilmore without some prodding. His crimes were not at all unusual then or now. Men go on similar killing sprees every week in this violent nation.

There were two things notable about Gilmore during the time of his crimes, arrest, and trial. First is that the death penalty had been reinstated in 1976, after a ten-year moratorium, and Gilmore was the first person executed in the modern era of capital punishment in America. His execution reignited our national taste for vengeance. Since his execution, over 1,000 others have been killed by the government of the United States.

And though anti-death penalty lawyers fought to stay Gilmore's execution, and were twice successful in doing so, Gilmore himself wanted to die. In prison, he twice tried to kill himself. When third-party appeals dragged on, he insisted that he be executed, and finally a panel of judges gave him his wish. "Among other people who have rights," one of the judges said, "Mr. Gilmore has his own." When an error is being made and the execution goes forward, he brought that on himself." When Gilmore was facing his firing squad, Gilmore was asked for any last words. "Let's do it," he said.

The execution of Gary Gilmore was crude and it was barbaric. He was wearing a T-shirt. A bag was put over his head. In a converted prison cannery, he was strapped to what looked like an electric chair. Twenty people were watching as five men with rifles, hidden behind a screen, shot bullets into his torso until he was dead. When he was cremated, his ashes were placed into a 59-cent bread bag and then scattered over Utah by his uncle. It was an ugly end to a life of ugliness.

Why, then, write 1,000 pages about the man? The answer is inconvenient. The answer is a holy pa in the ass. The answer is that murderers are fully human, too, and there is beauty to their lives, and joy in their days, and love, and music, and even aspirations of bliss or at least peace. The terrible exasperating thing about humans is how goodness and gentleness, and utter depravity and disregard for human life, can be contained within the same person, and in terrifyingly close proximity.

And so Gary Gilmore, a troubled young man in prison for armed robbery, writes eloquent, sensitive letters to his cousin Brenda. And so Gary Gilmore, who frequently gets in violent altercations at the U.S. Penitentiary in Marion, Illinois, draws exquisite pictures in his cell, accomplished renderings of children, among other subjects, and has an IQ of 130. And so Gary Gilmore, when released from prison, moves in with his uncle and quickly falls in love with Nicole Barrett, a beautiful and confused single mother of two. And so Gary Gilmore, shortly after Nicole leaves him, goes on a crime spree that claims two lives.

By the time Gilmore commits the murders in *The Executioner's Song*, Mailer has already done the terrible thing: he's made us care about the man. We want Gilmore to live up to the expectations Brenda places on him. We want him to make his uncle Vern proud. We want him to work hard, build a new life, and we want him and Nicole to make something of themselves. But his narrative follows a different path.

On two successive nights in 1976, Gary Gilmore committed murder. First he killed a gas station attendant, after robbing the station of less than \$100. Next he killed a motel manager, after taking a little more than that. They were the kind of senseless murders that even Gilmore's closest friends and family couldn't explain. They never doubted he did the crimes—they knew what he was capable of—but still, he could have robbed the stores without murdering the clerks. He could have borrowed the

money he needed. But instead he used a stolen gun to kill both men in cold blood. And in tiny Provo, Utah, there was only one man anyone suspected: Gary Gilmore. Before he was arrested, even his aunt and uncle knew it was him. “Do you think he did it?” Ida asks. “Yeah, he did it, the stupid shit,” Vera says.

Gilmore was locked up, tried, and convicted. With the death penalty reinstated, Gilmore’s notoriety grew. When he refused to appeal his verdict and insisted that he wanted to die, his story became known around the world. And it was then that Lawrence Schiller, a young photographer and producer, gained access to Gilmore and his family, friends, and ex-lovers, and began the process of meticulously interviewing them all, gaining a novelistic level of detail that was unprecedented and likely yet to be matched in the history of American journalism.

Schiller then reached out to Norman Mailer, who was then one of the most famous, celebrated, and controversial authors in the world. Schiller asked Mailer to convert his notes and interviews into what became *The Executioner’s Song*. And this book gives us every step Gilmore took from his violent beginnings to his brief dance with freedom and even love, to his violent end. It reveals Gilmore to be likable, irritating, immature, violent, doomed—but always a three-dimensional human being capable of charming anyone he meets. It reveals a family of profoundly giving and steady people who try to give Gary a new life but cannot heal a broken man. It reveals a judicial system in the United States that was and is deeply flawed, wildly inefficient, but largely well-intentioned. And it reveals a nation that is full of decent, astonishingly generous people who then and now feel that the best thing to do with a murderer is to murder him.

It’s important to know where Norman Mailer was in his career when he wrote this book. Since his first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, he had published books—including *Armies of the Night* and *The Deer Park* and *An American Dream*—to great acclaim, and some to great opprobrium. He was considered one of the most powerful stylists of his generation, his sentences muscular, hyper-intelligent, always unmistakably *his*.

One can imagine the shock, then, of reading even the first few sentences of *The Executioner’s Song*: “Brenda was six when she fell out of the apple tree. She climbed to the top and the limb with the good apples broke off. Gary caught her as the branch came scraping down. They were scared.”

There and throughout the book the prose is flat, unvarnished, plainspoken. The words on the page sound like the people the book depicts—shoemakers, mechanics, motel managers of Provo, Utah. Mailer has sublimated his own style, and his own ideas, to the story, and a fair argument could be made that this sublimation, rather than the mad stylistic tap-dancing of, say, *The Naked and the Dead*, is the greater feat. Nowhere do we hear Norman Mailer’s thoughts about Gary Gilmore, or Nicole Barrett, or capital punishment, or the West. Surely his point of view comes through, obliquely, by what he chooses to include in the book, and what he doesn’t. But we’re left with the story, unimpeded and un-commented-upon, and the story, here, is plenty, the details so exacting, so revealing, that every section of the book—it’s told in small, isolated chunks, like ice floes detached and self-sufficient—has its own small, perfect, and revelatory prose-poem.

“I know you,” Gilmore says the first time he meets Nicole. He doesn’t mean they’ve met before; they haven’t. They meet by chance at a friend’s house, and immediately he says that to her: “I know you.” And he means he knows that she, like him, is incomplete, wayward, prone to terrible mistakes. They talk late into the night. He asks her, “Hey, there’s a place in the darkness. You know what I mean? I think I met you there. I knew you there.” And so begins one of the most convincing love stories in all of American literature.

He quickly moves in with Nicole and her daughters, and we have the sense—and certainly not what readers will—that the two are destined for each other. That they will be forever entwined, even if the love is full of chaos and rupture. Nicole senses danger early on, and looks for an exit. She hedges her bets with her ex-husband, among other lovers. And just as quickly and capriciously as the romance began, it ends. At least for a while.

Did Gilmore kill because his heart was broken? Here the book gives us choices. We are not led to one conclusion, as would happen if the story were told by a lesser author. No, instead we're given the full messy range of pathologies. Gary was born bad. Or he was born fine, then was abused and twisted into an ugly shape. Or he was born fine, then twisted, then imprisoned, and then was given one last chance at redemption. He flirted briefly with decency but couldn't hack a life within boundaries of propriety. At the first obstacle, he went off the rails. Or maybe he was destined to kill and be killed.

Every time there is a place for Mailer to tell us the answer, to distill what we know down to a manageable conclusion, he gives us more raw, exasperating reality and a void where an easy conclusion would be expected. When the cops, prosecutors, and judges enter the picture, we expect and perhaps even *want* them to be crooked, bloodthirsty, unforgiving. But they're frustratingly decent and morally complex, and anything but monolithic. When the media enters the book, they, too, are not the cartoonish, sensationalizing ghouls we're given to expect. They have nuanced motives and act in damnable human ways.

Good god, it would be easier if this were not the case. If murderers were of a wholly different species, if they were beasts who we couldn't talk to, relate to, understand in any way, if they were incapable of love or light—it would be far easier. But this is not the case. They are almost always people precisely like ourselves, flawed and good and weak, capable of acts of courage and horrible mistakes.

I met a killer a few months ago. We were both dressed in tuxedos. This was at the Dayton Literary Peace Prize awards, and I was handing an award to Wilbert Rideau, who confessed to two murders committed in the heat of a robbery when he was 19. During his 44 years in prison, he became a prolific writer, a jailhouse journalist who exposed inhumane conditions at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola. He was released in 2006, and his memoir, the book for which he was getting the prize in Dayton, *In the Place of Justice*, tells his story, from being a confused kid caught in a bank robbery gone bad, to a man who had fully taken responsibility for his crimes and who had improved himself and contributed mightily to the betterment of thousands of lives.

Before the ceremony, I shook Rideau's hand, and we talked about Baton Rouge—where he's from—and about New Orleans and the weather in Dayton. His face is heavily lined, his eyes small and bright and wary, and his accent a deep Louisiana drawl. Even months later, writing these words, I am torn about my experience standing and talking with Rideau. And I can only think that the chiaroscuro sense of right and wrong that was instilled in me, that was reinforced by the simplistic moralizing of our news and entertainment, had convinced me that a person who kills is no longer a person. It would have been far easier, for everyone, if Rideau had been erased after he committed his crimes. He did a terrible thing, and eliminating him would have left the world tidier. Or so goes the logic of the last fifty years of American justice. We throw away flawed people, people who have made terrible mistakes, with regularity and great alacrity. We jail drug dealers for decades, and we execute killers. We want them away. Out of sight. Off the planet. Gone.

But what if they live on? Wilbert Rideau lived on. He told the world of life in prison, and told the world of the circumstances of his crimes and his rehabilitation. He became a productive human being when he was once, briefly, a force of destruction.

And though we erased him, shot him, and cremated him, Gary Gilmore lives on in this book, and we learn from his life. What do we learn? Maybe we learn that America is a uniquely violent and unforgiving place, a perpetual West where the landscape—an existential nothingness bordered by glorious unattainable mountains—both mocks the individual and inspires him toward desperate acts. Maybe we learn that Gary Gilmore was fully human, but not fully equipped to live among us; that we're essentially a decent people, wanting contentment and prosperity for all, seeking harmony so tenaciously that we need to kill those who threaten it. Maybe it's not what we learn that's crucial, but the questions we're left with. Will we always be a manic-depressive nation of the greatest and most vile achievements? Will we always be a nation of both astronauts and mass-murderers? *The Executioner's Song* doesn't answer these questions, but it comes as close to solving the enigma of America as any other work of art we have.

*Deep in my dungeon
I welcome you here
Deep in my dungeon
I worship your fear
Deep in my dungeon
I dwell
I do not know
if I wish you well.*

—old prison rhyme

WESTERN VOICES

PART ONE

Gary

THE FIRST DAY

1

Brenda was six when she fell out of the apple tree. She climbed to the top and the limb with the good apples broke off. Gary caught her as the branch came scraping down. They were scared. The apple trees were their grandmother's best crop and it was forbidden to climb in the orchard. She helped him drag away the tree limb and they hoped no one would notice. That was Brenda's earliest recollection of Gary.

She was six and he was seven and she thought he was swell. He might be rough with the other kids but never with her. When the family used to come out to Grandpa Brown's farm on Decoration Day or Thanksgiving, Brenda would only play with the boys. Later, she remembered those parties as peaceful and warm. There were no raised voices, no cussing, just a good family get-together. She remembered liking Gary so well she would not bother to see who else was there—Hi, Grandma, can I have a cookie?—come on, Gary, let's go.

Right outside the door was a lot of open space. Beyond the backyard were orchards and fields and then the mountains. A dirt road went past the house and up the slope of the valley into the canyon.

Gary was kind of quiet. There was one reason they got along. Brenda was always gabbing and he was a good listener. They had a lot of fun. Even at that age he was real polite. If you got into trouble he'd come back and help you out.

Then he moved away. Gary and his brother Frank Jr., who was a year older, and his mother, Bessie, went to join Frank Sr., in Seattle. Brenda didn't see any more of him for a long time. Her next memory of Gary was not until she was thirteen. Then her mother, Ida, told her that Aunt Bessie had called from Portland, and was in a very blue mood. Gary had been put in Reform School. So Brenda wrote him a letter, and Gary sent an answer all the way back from Oregon, and said he felt bad putting his family through what he did.

On the other hand, he sure didn't like it in Reform School. His dream when he came out, he wrote, was to be a mobster and push people around. He also said Gary Cooper was his favorite movie star.

Now Gary was the kind of boy who would not send a second letter until he received your reply. Years could go by but he wasn't going to write if you hadn't answered his last. Since Brenda, before long, was married—she was sixteen and thought she couldn't live without a certain guy—his correspondence lapsed. She might mail a letter from time to time, but Gary didn't really get back in Brenda's life until a couple of years ago when Aunt Bessie called again. She was still upset about Gary. He had been sent from Oregon State Penitentiary to Marion, Illinois, and that, Bessie informed Ida, was the place they built to replace Alcatraz. She was not accustomed to thinking of her son as a dangerous criminal who could be kept only in a Maximum Security prison.

It made Brenda begin to think of Bessie. In the Brown family with its seven sisters and two brothers, Bessie must have been the one who was talked about the most. Bessie had green eyes and black hair and was one of the prettiest girls around. She had an artistic temperament and hated to work in the field because she didn't want the sun to make her tough and tanned and leathery. Her skin was very white. She wanted to keep that look. Even if they were Mormons farming in the desert, she liked pretty clothes and finery, and would wear white dresses with wide Chinese sleeves and white gloves she'd made herself. She and a girl friend would get all dressed up and hitchhike to Salt Lake City. Now she was old and arthritic.

Brenda started writing to Gary once more. Before long, they were into quite a correspondence. Gary's intelligence was really coming through. He hadn't reached high school before they put him in the Reformatory, so he must have done a lot of reading in prison to get this much education together. He certainly knew how to use big words. Brenda couldn't pronounce a few of the longer ones, let alone be sure of their meaning.

Sometimes, Gary would delight her by adding little drawings in the margin; they were damn good. She spoke of trying to do some artwork herself, and mailed a sample of her stuff. He corrected her drawing in order to show the mistakes she was making. Good enough to tutor at long distance.

Once in a while Gary would remark that having been in prison so long he felt more like the victim than the man who did the deed. Of course, he did not deny having committed a crime or two. He was always letting Brenda know he was not Charley Good Guy.

Yet after they had been sending letters for a year or more, Brenda noticed a change. Gary no longer seemed to feel he would never get out of jail. His correspondence became more hopeful. Brenda said to her husband, Johnny, one day, Well, I really think Gary's ready.

She had gotten into the habit of reading his letters to Johnny, and to her mother and father and her sister. Sometimes after discussing those letters, her parents, Vern and Ida, would discuss what Brenda ought to answer, and they would feel full of concern for Gary. Her sister, Toni, often spoke of how much his drawings impressed her. There was so much sorrow in those pictures. Children with great big sad eyes.

Once Brenda asked: "How does it feel to live in your country club out there? Just what kind of world do you live in?"

He had written back:

I don't think there's any way to adequately describe this sort of life to anyone that's never experienced it. I mean, it would be totally alien to you and your way of thinking, Brenda. It's like another planet.

—which words, in her living room, offered visions of the moon.

Being here is like walking up to the edge and looking over 24 hours a day for more days than you care to recall.

He finished by writing:

Above all, it's a matter of staying strong no matter what happens.

Sitting around the Christmas tree, they thought of Gary and wondered if he might be with them next year. Talked about his chances for parole. He had already asked Brenda to sponsor him, and she had replied, "If you screw up, I'll be the first against you."

Still, the family was more in favor than not. Toni, who had never written him a line, offered to be co-sponsor. While some of Gary's notes were terribly depressed, and the one where he asked if Brenda would sponsor him had no more good feeling than a business memo, there were a few that really got to you.

Dear Brenda,

Received your letter tonight and it made me feel nice. Your attitude helps restore my old soul.... I have a place to stay and a job guarantee me an awful lot, but the fact that somebody cares, means more to me than parole board. I've always been more or less alone before.

Only after the Christmas party did it come over Brenda that she was going to sponsor a man who she hadn't seen in close to thirty years. It made her think of Toni's remark that Gary had a different face in every photograph.

Now, Johnny began to get concerned about it. He had been all for Brenda writing to Gary, but when it came down to bringing him into their family, Johnny began to have a few apprehensions. It wasn't that he was embarrassed to harbor a criminal, Johnny simply wasn't that sort of person, he just felt like there's going to be problems.

For one thing, Gary wasn't coming into an average community. He would be entering a Mormon stronghold. Things were tough enough for a man just out of prison without having to deal with people who thought drinking coffee and tea was sinful.

Nonsense, said Brenda. None of their friends were that observing. She and Johnny hardly qualified as a typical straitlaced Utah County couple.

Yes, said Johnny, but think of the atmosphere. All those super-clean BYU kids getting ready to go out as missionaries. Walking on the street could make you feel you were at a church supper. There had, said Johnny, to be tension.

Brenda hadn't been married to Johnny for eleven years without coming to know that her husband was the type for peace at any price. No waves in his life if he could help it. Brenda wouldn't say she looked for trouble, but a few waves kept life interesting. So Brenda suggested that Gary might on stay weekends with them, but live with Vern and Ida. That satisfied John.

Well, he told her with a grin, if I don't go along, you're going to do it anyway. He was right. She could feel awfully sympathetic to anybody who was boxed in. "He's paid his dues," she told Johnny "and I want to bring him home."

Those were the words she used when she talked to Gary's future parole officer. When asked, "What do you want this man here?" Brenda answered, "He's been in jail thirteen years. I think it's time Gary came home."

Brenda knew her power in conversations like this. She might be that much nearer to thirty-five than thirty, but she hadn't gone into marriage four times without knowing she was pretty attractive on the hoof, and the parole officer, Mont Court, was blond and tall with a husky build. Just an average good-looking American guy, very much on the Mr. Clean side, but all the same, Brenda thought, pretty likable. He was sympathetic to the idea of a second chance, and would flex with you if there was good reason. If not, he would come down pretty hard. That was how she read him. He seemed just the kind of man for Gary.

He had worked, Mont Court told her, with a lot of people who had just come out of prison, and he warned Brenda that there would be a recycling period. Maybe a little trouble here or there, a drunken brawl. She thought he was broad-minded for a Mormon. A man couldn't, he explained, walk out of prison and go right into straight normal living. It was like coming out of the Service, especially if you'd been held a prisoner of war. You didn't become a civilian immediately. He said if Gary had problems, she should try to encourage him to come in and talk about it.

Then Mont Court and another probation officer paid a visit to Vern at his shoe shop and looked in on her father's ability as a shoe repair man. They must have been impressed because nobody in the parts was going to know more about shoes than Vern Damico, and he would, after all, not only give Gary a place to live, but a job in his shop.

A letter arrived from Gary to announce that he was going to be released in a couple of weeks. The early in April, he called Brenda from the prison and told her he would get out in a few days. He planned, said Gary, to take the bus that went through Marion to St. Louis, and from there connect with other buses to Denver and Salt Lake. Over the phone, he had a nice voice, soft spoken, twangy, he was back. A lot of feeling in the center of it.

With all the excitement, Brenda was hardly taking into account that it was practically the same route their Mormon great-grandfather took when he jumped off from Missouri with a handcart near a hundred years ago, and pushed west with all he owned over the prairies, and the passes of the Rockies, to come to rest at Provo in the Mormon Kingdom of Deseret just fifty miles below Salt Lake.

2

Gary couldn't have traveled more than forty or fifty miles from Marion, however, before he phoned from a rest stop to tell Brenda that the bus ride so far had been the most kidney-jogging experience he ever felt and he'd decided to cash in his ticket at St. Louis and come the rest of the way by plane. Brenda agreed. If Gary wanted to travel deluxe, well, he had a little coming.

He called her again that evening. He was definitely on the last flight and would phone once more when he arrived.

"Gary, it takes us forty-five minutes to get to the airport."

“I don’t mind.”

~~Brenda thought this was a novel approach, but then he hadn’t been taking a lot of airplanes. Probably he wanted time to unwind.~~

Even the children were excited, and Brenda certainly couldn’t sleep. After midnight, she and Johnny just waited. Brenda had threatened to kill anybody who called her late—she wanted that line to be open.

“I’m here,” said his voice. It was 2 A.M.

“Okay, we’re coming to get you.”

“Right on,” said Gary and hung up. This was one guy who wouldn’t talk your ear off for a dime.

On the ride, Brenda kept telling John to hurry up. It was the middle of the night, and nobody was on the road. John, however, wasn’t about to get a ticket. They were traveling the Interstate, after all. So he kept at 60. Brenda gave up fighting. She was altogether too excited to fight.

“Oh, my God,” said Brenda, “I wonder how tall he is.”

“What?” said Johnny.

She had begun to think he might be short. That would be awful. Brenda was only five feet five, but it was a height she knew well. From the time she was ten years old, she had been 130 pounds, five feet five, and wholly equipped with the same size bra as now—C cup.

“What do you mean, is he tall?” asked Johnny.

“I don’t know, I hope he is.”

In junior high, if she put on heels, the only person big enough to dance with her was the gym teacher. She used to hate like hell to kiss a boy on the forehead and tell him good night. In fact, she got so paranoid about being tall it could have stunted her growth.

It certainly made her like boys taller than herself. They let her feel feminine. She just had the nightmare that when they got to the airport, Gary would only come up to her armpit. Why, she would abandon the whole thing right there. Shift for yourself, she would tell him.

They pulled up to the island that ran parallel to the main entrance of the terminal building. So soon as she got out of the car, there was Johnny over on the driver’s side, trying to tuck his shirttail in. That annoyed Brenda no end.

She could see Gary leaning against the building. “There he is,” Brenda cried, but Johnny said, “Wait, I have to zip my pants.”

“Who gives a shit about your shirttail?” said Brenda. “I’m going.”

As she crossed the street between the parking island and the main door, Gary saw her and picked up his satchel. Pretty soon they were running toward each other. As they met, Gary dropped his bag, looked at her, then encircled her so hard she could have been hugged by a bear. Even Johnny had never gripped Brenda that hard.

When Gary put her down on the ground again, she stood back and looked at him. She had to talk to him all in. She said, “My God, you’re tall.”

He started to laugh. "What did you expect, a midget?"

"I don't know what I expected," she said, "but, thank God, you're tall."

Johnny was just standing there with his big good face going, um, um, um.

"Hey, coz," said Gary, "it's fine to see you." He shook hands with Johnny.

"By the way, Gary," said Brenda demurely, "this is my husband."

Gary said, "I assumed that's who it was."

Johnny said, "Have you got everything with you?"

Gary picked up his flight bag—it was pathetically small, thought Brenda—and said, "This is it. This is all I have." He said it without humor and without self-pity. Material things were obviously not a big transaction to him.

Now she noticed his clothes. He had a black trench coat slung on his arm and was wearing a maroon blazer over—could you believe it?—a yellow and green striped shirt. Then a pair of beige polyester trousers that were badly hemmed. Plus a pair of black plastic shoes. She paid attention to people's footwear because of her father's trade and she thought, Wow, that's really cheap. They didn't even give him a pair of leather shoes to go home in.

"Come on," said Gary, "let's get the hell out of here."

She could see then he'd had something to drink. He wasn't plastered, but he sure was tipped. Made a point of putting his arm around her when they walked to the car.

When they got in, Brenda sat in the middle and Johnny drove. Gary said, "Hey, this is kind of a cute car. What is it?"

"A yellow Maverick," she told him. "My little lemon."

They drove. The first silence came in.

"Are you tired?" asked Brenda.

"A little tired, but then I'm a little drunk too." Gary grinned. "I took advantage of the champagne on the flight. I don't know if it was the altitude, or not having good liquor for a long time, but, boy, I got toasty up on that plane. I was happier than hell."

Brenda laughed. "I guess you're entitled to be snockered."

The prison sure cut his hair short. It would, Brenda judged, be heavy handsome brown hair when it grew out, but for now it stuck up hick style in the back. He kept pushing it down.

No matter, she liked his looks. In the half-light that came into the car as they drove through Sausalito on the Interstate, the city sleeping on both sides of them, she decided that Gary was everything she expected in that department. A long, fine nose, good chin, thin well-shaped lips. He had character about his face.

"Want to go for a cup of coffee?" Johnny asked.

Brenda felt Gary tighten. It was as if even the thought of walking into a strange place got him edgy. "Come on," Brenda said, "we'll give the ten-cent tour."

They picked Jean's Cafe. It was the only place south of Salt Lake open at 3 A.M., but it was Friday night and people were sporting their finery. Once installed in their booth, Gary said, "I guess I got to get some clothes."

Johnny encouraged him to eat, but he wasn't hungry. Obviously too excited. Brenda felt as if she could pick up the quiver in each bright color that Gary was studying on the jukebox. He looked close to being dazzled by the revolving red, blue, and gold light show on the electronic screen of the cigarette console. He was so involved it drew her into his mood. When a couple of cute girls walked in, and Gary mumbled, "Not bad," Brenda laughed. There was something so real about the way he said it.

Couples kept coming from parties and leaving, and the sound of cars parking and taking off didn't stop. Still, Brenda was not looking at the door. Her best friend could have walked in, but she wouldn't have been all alone with Gary. She couldn't remember when somebody had absorbed her attention that much. She didn't mean to be rude to Johnny, but she did kind of forget he was there.

Gary, however, looked across the table and said, "Hey man, thanks. I appreciate how you went along with Brenda to get me out." They shook hands again. This time Gary did it thumbs up.

Over the coffee, he asked Brenda about her folks, her sis, her kids, and Johnny's job.

Johnny did maintenance at the Pacific State Cast Iron and Pipe. While he was blacksmithing now, he used to make iron pipe, fire it, cast it, sometimes do the mold work.

The conversation died. Gary had no clue what to ask Johnny next. He knows nothing about you, Brenda thought, and I know so little about his life.

Gary spoke of a couple of prison friends and what good men they were. Then he said apologetically, Well, you don't want to hear about prison, it's not very pleasant.

Johnny said they were only tiptoeing around because they didn't want to offend him. "We're curious," said Johnny, "but, you know, we don't want to ask: what's it like in there? What do they do to you?"

Gary smiled. They were silent again.

Brenda knew she was making Gary nervous as hell. She kept staring at him constantly, but she couldn't get enough of his face. There were so many corners in it.

"God," she kept saying, "it's good to have you here."

"It's good to get back."

"Wait till you get to know this country," she said. She was dying to tell him about the kind of fun they could have on Utah Lake, and the camper trips they would take in the canyons. The desert was just as gray and brown and grim as desert anywhere, but the mountains went up to twelve thousand feet, and the canyons were green with beautiful forests and super drinking parties with friends. They could teach him how to hunt with bow and arrow, she was about ready to tell him, when all of a sudden she got a good look at Gary in the light. Speak of all the staring she had done, it was as if she hadn't studied him at all yet. Now she felt a strong sense of woe. He was marked up much more than she had expected.

She reached out to touch his cheek at the place where he had a very bad scar, and Gary said, "Nice."

looking, isn't it?"

Brenda said, "I'm sorry, Gary, I didn't mean to embarrass you."

This set up such a pause that Johnny finally asked, "How'd it happen?"

"A guard hit me," said Gary. He smiled. "They had me tied down for a shot of Prolixin—and managed to spit in the doctor's face. Then I got clobbered."

"How," asked Brenda, "would you like to take that guard who hit you, and get ahold of him?"

"Don't pick my brain," said Gary.

"Okay," said Brenda, "but do you hate him?"

"God, yeah," said Gary, "wouldn't you?"

"Yeah, I would," said Brenda. "Just checking."

Half an hour later, driving home, they went by Point of the Mountain. Off to the left of the Interstate a long hill came out of the mountains and its ridge was like the limb of a beast whose paw just reached the highway. On the other side, in the desert to the right, was Utah State Prison. There were only a few lights in its buildings now. They made jokes about Utah State Prison.

3

Back in her living room, drinking beer, Gary began to unwind. He liked beer, he confessed. In prison they knew how to make a watery brew out of bread. Called it Pruno. In fact, both Brenda and Johnny were observing that Gary could put brew away as fast as anyone they knew.

Johnny soon got tired and went to sleep. Now Gary and Brenda really began to talk. A few prison stories came out of him. To Brenda, each seemed wilder than the one before. Probably they were half true, half full of beer. He had to be reciting out of his hind end.

It was only when she looked out the window and saw the night was over that she realized how long they had been talking. They stepped through the door to look at the sun coming up over the back of her ranch house and all her neighbors' ranch houses, and standing there, on her plot of lawn, in a heap of strewn-about toys, wet with cold spring dew, Gary looked at the sky and took a deep breath.

"I feel like jogging," he said.

"You've got to be nuts, tired as you are," she said.

He just stretched and breathed deep, and a big smile came over his face. "Hey, man," he said, "I'm really out."

In the mountains, the snow was iron gray and purple in the hollows, and glowed like gold on every slope that faced the sun. The clouds over the mountains were lifting with the light. Brenda took a good look into his eyes and felt full of sadness again. His eyes had the expression of rabbits she had flushed. A scared-rabbit was the common expression, but she had looked into those eyes of scared rabbits and they were calm and tender and kind of curious. They did not know what would happen next.

THE FIRST WEEK

1

Brenda put Gary on the foldout couch in the TV room. When she began to make the bed, he stood there smiling.

“What gives you that impish little grin?” she said after a pause.

“Do you know how long it’s been since I slept on a sheet?”

He took a blanket but no pillow. Then she went to her room. She never knew if he fell asleep. She had the feeling he lay down and rested and never took off his polyesters, just his shirt. When she got up a few hours later, he was up and around.

They were still having coffee when Toni came over to visit, and Gary gave her a big hug, and stood back, and framed her face with his hands and said, “I finally get to meet the kid sister. Man, I’ve looked at your photographs. What a foxy lady you are.”

“You’re going to make me blush,” said Toni.

She certainly looked like Brenda. Same popping black eyes, black hair, same sassy look. It was just that Brenda was on the voluptuous side and Toni was slim enough to model. Take your pick.

When they sat down, Gary kept reaching over and putting his arm around Toni, or taking hold of her hand. “I wish you weren’t my cousin,” he said, “and married to such a big tall dude.”

Later, Toni would tell Brenda how good and wise Howard had been for saying, “Go over and meet Gary without me.” She went on to describe how warm Gary made her feel, not sexy, but more like a brother. He had amazed her with how much he knew of her life. Like that Howard was six foot six. Brenda kept herself from remarking that he had not learned it from any letters Toni had written, since Toni had never written a line.

Before Brenda took Gary over to meet Vern and Ida, Johnny showed a test of strength. He took the bathroom scale and squeezed it between his hands until the needle went up to 250 pounds.

Gary tried and reached 120. He went crazy and squeezed the scales until he was shaking. The needle went to 150.

“Yeah,” said Johnny, “you’re improving.”

“What’s the highest you’ve gone?” asked Gary.

“Oh,” said Johnny, “the scale stops at 280, but I’ve taken it past there. I suppose 300.”

On the drive to the shoe shop, Brenda told Gary a little more about her father. Vern, she explained, might be the strongest man she knew.

Stronger than Johnny?

Well, Brenda explained, nobody could top Johnny at squeezing the scales, but she didn’t know who had ever beaten Vern Damico at arm wrestling.

Vern, said Brenda, was strong enough to be gentle all the time. “I don’t think my father ever gave me a spanking except once in my whole life and I truly asked for that. It was only one pat on the hind end, but that hand of his could cover your whole body.”

The mountains had been gold and purple at dawn, but now in the morning they were big and brown and bald and had gray rain-soaked snow on the ridges. It got into their mood. The distance from the north side of Orem where she lived, to Vern's store in the center of Provo, was six miles, but going along State Street, it took a while. There were shopping malls and quick-eat palaces, used-car dealers, chain clothing stores and gas stops, appliance stores and highway signs and fruit stands. There were banks and real estate firms in one-story office compounds and rows of condominiums with sawed-off mansard roofs. There hardly seemed a building that was not painted in a nursery color: pastel yellow, pastel orange, pastel tan, pastel blue. Only a few faded two-story wooden houses looked as if they had been built even thirty years ago. On State Street, going the six miles from Orem to Provo, those houses looked as old as frontier saloons.

"It sure has changed," said Gary.

Overhead was the immense blue of the strong sky of the American West. That had not changed.

At the foot of the mountains, on the boundary between Orem and Provo, was Brigham Young University. It was also new and looked like it had been built from prefabricated toy kits. Twenty years ago, BYU had a few thousand students. Now the enrollment was close to thirty thousand, Brenda told him. As Notre Dame to good Catholics, so BYU to good Mormons.

2

"I better tell you a little more about Vern," Brenda said. "You have to understand when Dad is joking and when he is not. That can be a little hard to figure out because Dad does not always smile when he is joking."

She did not tell him that her father had been born with a harelip, but then she assumed he knew. Vern had a full palate so his speech was not affected, but the mark was right out there. His mustache didn't pretend to hide it. When he first went to school it didn't take him long to become one of the toughest kids. Any boy who wanted to kid Vern about his lip, said Brenda, got a belt in the snout.

It made Vern's personality. To this day, when children came into the shoe shop and saw him for the first time, Vern did not have to hear what the child was saying when the mother said, Hush. He was used to that. It didn't bother him now. Over the years, however, he had had to do a lot to overcome it. Not only did it leave him strong, but frank. He might be gentle in his manner, Brenda said, but he usually came out and said what he thought. That could be abrasive.

Yet when Gary met Vern, Brenda decided she had prepared him too much. He was a little nervous when he said hello, and looked around, and acted surprised at the size of the shoe shop, as if he hadn't expected a big cave of a place. Vern commented that it was a lot of room to walk around in when customers weren't there, and they got on from that to his osteoarthritis. Vern had a powerfully painful accumulation in his knee that had frozen the joint. Just hearing about it seemed to get Gary concerned. It didn't seem phony, Brenda thought. She could almost feel the pain of Vern's knee pass right into Gary's scrotum.

Vern thought Gary ought to move in with Ida and himself right away, but shouldn't plan to go to work for a few days. A fellow needed time to get acquainted with his freedom, Vern observed. After

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