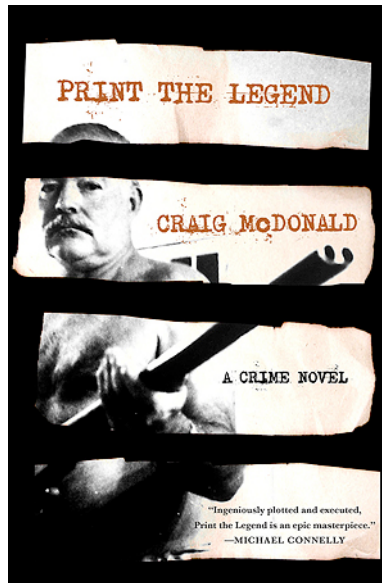

*PAULSON:
IDAHO, 1965*



*“Yes, I suppose some editors are failed
writers — but so are most writers.”*

— T.S. Eliot

A “BON REPAS”

Hector held Hannah’s hand, steadying her as she carefully backed into Hector’s blue Bel Air. She said, “I’m not comfortable doing this.”

Mary had called to invite Hannah out for “a girl’s day” of lunch and some shopping.

“It’s Mary Hemingway,” Hector said, sliding behind the wheel. He started the engine and said, “You couldn’t possibly turn her down. I’ll see you safely there. Once

you're ready to be picked up, just call the Sun Valley lounge and ask for me. Then you just wait there in the restaurant and I'll come in and fetch you. In the meantime, I've got some Hannah Paulson to read...and maybe a scholar or two to take up with for a time."

He came around the car, helped her out and then kissed the top of her head, at her sunburned part. "Good luck."

The baby kicked and Hannah winced, pressing her palms to the small of her back as she waddled to front door of the restaurant.

Hannah was at first embittered at the prospect of losing another day's writing time, but she feared a "no" might damage things with Mary for Richard. Hannah reconciled herself to the fact she would simply have to accommodate the foul-mouthed widow — the old lady whom Hannah just couldn't think of, even fleetingly, as a possible murderess.

Having made her separate peace with the prospect of another lost afternoon, Hannah was now mildly intrigued by the notion of having Mary to herself for a time — the opportunity to perhaps inveigle some minor revelation from Mary to gently tease Richard with.

She squinted and felt faintly nauseous as she passed from the glare of the harsh afternoon sun and the scent of chimney smoke and sage into the dark restaurant that smelled of garlic and seared salmon and souring afternoon cocktails.

Hannah found Mary seated at the fateful table that Richard had pointed out during lunch several days before. Mary waved with her cigarette hand — her right hand. "Hey there, kid! How're you feeling today, Pip?"

Hannah frowned. Christ: Confused with Mary's hairdresser, Epiphany, again. "Back hurts a little, but then it has off and on for days," Hannah said. She shrugged her purse from her shoulder and draped it by its strap across the back of the chair opposite Mary. "I'll be glad when it's over and I can shed the weight. Get back in shape." Hannah scanned the dark restaurant, her eyes still adjusting from the sun: no tall men with widow's peaks lurking at adjacent tables.

"How long until the 'coming out,' so to speak? You look closer than close."

Hannah carefully sat down and ran her hand through her long, blonder hair — bleaching now from the Idaho sun — brushing it back from her lightly tanned and freckled forehead. She had told Mary before when the baby was due, but Mary had been hammering down the gimlets that afternoon. Hannah also thought the old widow more the drunk in some ways than reports to Richard had indicated.

"Maybe a month, if all goes according to plan," Hannah said again. "But you know how these things are." Hannah bit her lip: No, Mary *didn't* know. She couldn't. Mary's single, abortive pregnancy had precluded any others. The old widow stirred her martini with a plastic swizzle stick. She smiled and her dimple disrupted the horizontal scar that trailed raggedly across her left cheek, halfway between her eye and her small, prim mouth. Mary had gotten the scar as the result of a crash in the couple's Lincoln during a summer's drive on the Calzada de Mantilla in 1945.

Mary winked at Hannah. "Our dear eager Dickie. He could have waited for your sake. I'm not on death's door you know. I certainly would have kept another couple of months 'til baby was born. Frankly, what's a woman to make of a man who drags his very very pregnant wife all the way from Michigan to next-to-nowhere Idaho, two

thousand miles from her obstetrician and her family? What the hell kind of selfish, irresponsible chickenshit maneuver is that? And do you want a drink — wine, beer? Something stronger for that poor sore back?”

“Uh, no. No liquor until after the kid’s on his own. Then I’ll drink like a fish for a week, I suppose.” Hannah wrinkled her freckled nose. “Nae, not even then: I’ll be nursing for months and months.”

“You young mothers are too good these days. In my time, and certainly before my time, we never gave alcohol or cigarettes or anything like that any thought in terms of its effect on a baby. Hell, in my fertile days, doctors ordered small-pelvised woman like *moi* to drink wine to keep the little shitters’ birth weight down. I’ll bet you don’t even drink coffee now, do you Epiphany?”

“Hannah. And no, not for another month and that’s the worst of all. I’m a coffee hound. Now, it’s just water, juice or decaffeinated tea for me.”

“So be it, kiddo. Now what about the other? What if you’re early, Hannah? Richard’s got you out here in the middle of Timfuckingbukt, away from everything and everyone you should have rightly at hand. I frankly worry for you, Daughter.”

Hannah was momentarily jarred by Mary’s use of “daughter,” until she remembered that Papa, stymied in his desire for a little girl of his own, had taken later in life to calling nearly all his younger women friends “Daughter.” Evidently, Mary had gotten the habit. At least it would save the widow the trouble of remembering “Hannah.”

Mary persisted. “Don’t you want your people there when your time comes, Daughter?”

Hannah shrugged. “There aren’t all that many of my people to be there. I’ve got a sister and a brother-in-law in Michigan. It’d be nice if they could loiter in the lobby and gush through the glass, but it’s not essential, I suppose.”

“Well not to Richard, I’d wager,” Mary said. “How’d you wind up over here, anyway? You didn’t actually leave Scotland to study with Dickie?”

Hannah looked at her hands, rubbing and kneading her swollen knuckles. “After my father died, we moved from Scotland — we lived in a village not far from Glencoe called Kinlochleven — to the states. My mother remarried to a professor. I was about fifteen when we came over. Now mother and my step-father are both dead.”

Hannah scanned the mountains ranged around them. “In the morning, or at night, when you can just see silhouettes, the mountains around here look a little like home.”

“I have to say, I just love that darling accent of yours.”

“Thanks, though it’s not all it once was.”

Mary snorted and shook her head. “What is? I’m still terribly worried about you being out here and so close to your time.”

“You’ve got doctors here in Ketchum and Sun Valley and I presume local pregnant women for whom those physicians are plenty good enough,” Hannah said.

Mary drew on her cigarette and myriad little clefts that had accumulated from years of pursing her lips to inhale bunched up around her overly made-up mouth. “Your family is going to want to be there for you, Daughter. And you don’t want to travel by car from here all the way back to Michigan with a newborn. You certainly don’t want to make the drive in the final week or two of your pregnancy. That’s a grueling, boring ride.

Most of Wyoming, in particular, is mind-numbingly bland. And so far as I'm concerned, cursed to boot."

Hannah winked. "Fact is, I'm only planning to stay on another couple of days, then I'm heading home to see my doctor. Richard swears he'll be back in time to cut the cord."

Mary smiled and tugged one of her martini's plump green olives from its skewer with her sharp little yellow teeth. She chewed the olive, winking at Hannah. "I'll get Dickie home in time! Hell, all the boy really needs to do is to read the draft of my autobiography — it's all in there."

"Oh aye. But you know scholars," Hannah said, "always hoping to spark an untapped memory... glean a fresh perspective on a familiar incident, or tired anecdote."

Mary winked. "Perfect segue. About that — what's Dickie's front-end obsession with Papa's final days? I thought we'd go about it all chronologically. Me, then Papa and our life together, then Papa's end and what I'm left with now. But right from the gate Dickie is just dragging through those awful last days. Dickie seems to believe Papa might not have been the complete mental wreck that he truly truly was during those last bad weeks. What's Dickie's real take on all this?"

Hannah sipped her water, made a sour face, then fished out the thin lemon slice she hadn't noticed floating amidst the ice and draped it over the side of the saucer upon which her upended coffee cup rested. She shrugged. "Richard hardly ever discusses his work with me, Mary."

"Balls," Mary said, smiling and then winking. "Give — what's the gen on his strategy?"

“I honestly don’t know. You level first — what’s Richard asking that’s got your back up?”

Mary scowled and blew smoke out both nostrils. “It’s not really so much what he has asked, as what he has volunteered — little gossipy tidbits of so-called scholarship he’s heard about regarding strange little odds and ends.”

“Nothing real specific in all that to give me a foothold,” Hannah said, determined to brazen it out. “Might you give me a little more to work with?”

Mary leaned forward confidentially. Hannah resisted the urge to lean away and instead cupped her hands prayer fashion over her nose and mouth — filter out that second-hand cigarette smoke trailing from the long cone of ash quivering in Mary’s knobby hand.

A waiter passed by and Mary snagged his sleeve. “Hey Pancho! We’ve been here forever — we’re ready to order. Chop chop!”

“Let me get my pad,” said the young Mexican waiter, whose nameplate said “Candelario,” and whom Hannah made for a busboy. He glanced at Hannah’s empty glass. “More iced tea, ma’am?”

Hannah smiled. “Just a pennywheep.”

“Beg your pardon?”

“A little bit...and it’s gotta be decaf.”

She watched the busboy confer with the bartender who signaled for a real waiter.

Hannah Paulson chewed her lip, quickly glancing over the menu. “Think I’ll have the chowder.”

“You’re eating for two,” Mary said.

“Sure, later today,” Hannah said. “Right now, I’m eating for me, and me is not real hungry.”

“Tell me about that. Dickie truly excited about this birth?” Mary looked up over her menu, her wrinkled forehead more wrinkled with concern. “Or did he at first push for a procedure — advocate ‘letting in the air,’ as my late husband once put it?”

“It got mentioned, but only in a kind of, ‘if ye want to do that, I’ll stand by your decision,’ way. Just giving me an out if I opted.”

“Right.” Mary snorted softly. “Papa wanted a daughter so terribly badly. Sometimes I think if I had given him one, he might never have....” She shook her head, smoothing her wrinkled, shaking hand over the tablecloth. “The boys were no impediment to that. At least two of them had disappointed him in some way or another, there, close to the end. If he had lived longer, of course he would have gotten over whatever their probably imagined infractions were. But a daughter...well, Papa wouldn’t have been able to curse her with the carnage of his leaving. She would only have been 15 in 1961 — undergoing a womanly makeover that would have freshly enthralled her father. Hell, she would even have been living in that house just northwest of here that July morning. He wouldn’t have risked her finding him looking like that — his whole bloody head blown off. No man would let his daughter discover her daddy dead by suicide. He’d go off somewhere instead, let strangers find him. He’d love her that much.”

“I’d never thought of that,” Hannah said softly, feeling her cheeks and neck flush. “I — I mean, I knew of Papa’s deep, deep yearning for a daughter, but I hadn’t ever thought about what effect, if any, it might have had on, well, the other.”

Mary said, “You know, this is still, in most ways, a very small town.”

“Sure. Clearly.”

“And I do enjoy some small celebrity here.”

“You’re just being modest,” Hannah said, wondering where Mary was headed now.

“Got a call this morning. Seems Dickie’s angling for access to Papa’s death certificate — his death records. Idaho law only allows for release of those records to immediate family, and I’m not getting them for Dickie. Neither would the boys, I’d wager. So what’s your old man up to?”

“God knows. Richard is an exhaustive researcher. I suppose he’s just being thorough.”

“He spent a lot of time in the foyer that morning you visited.”

Hannah bit her lip, nodding slowly. “It’s so full of...” She shrugged, at a rare loss for words. “I mean, knowing that that’s where it happened makes it hard to enter there without sort of seizing up inside. I suppose it’s the same looking at that balcony at Ford’s Theater, or driving through Diely Plaza.”

“Lincoln and Kennedy — I had dinner with Jack, by the way — were murdered.”

Hannah ran her hand back through her hair. “I’m sure it’s the same in that bungalow where they found Marilyn Monroe after she killed herself. That little entryway to your home is just a terrible place for anyone who loves your husband’s work. It’s a tragic, haunted spot.”

Mary leaned forward suddenly and patted Hannah’s hand. “Next time you come to visit, Daughter, you come around back and one of my girls will let you in. I don’t want you being spooked in my house.” Mary shook loose another cigarette from her pack. “I’m

not. Spooked by my house, I mean. I feel enveloped by the place. I love all the views.

The security. It's a hopeful place. Did you know it's faced to catch the rising sun?"

<http://www.craigmcdonaldbooks.com/legend.php>