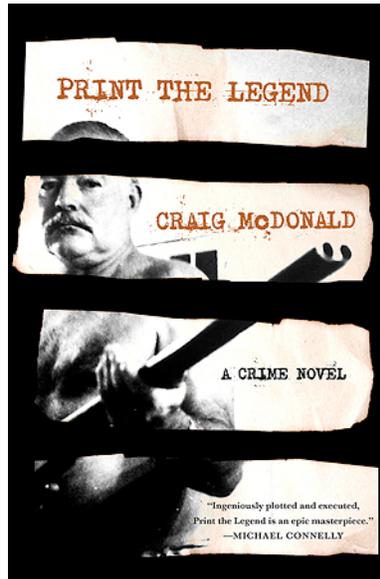

***PAULSON:
NEW YORK, N.Y., 1965***



*“We are always paid for our suspicion by
finding what we suspect.”*

— Henry David Thoreau

THROUGH A GLASS, DARKLY

The artist/poet/critic/journalist/Kennedy cabinet member was the latest to be sharing his memories for Hannah.

Hector had begged off this particular interview. He was holed up in the hotel room: “Me and this fella who you’re going to see, we didn’t get on, not at all,” Hector said. “And he knew Hem during the forties...that’s when Hem and me were on the outs.”

Now she sat across from her subject, a wire recorder running between them. She had filled half a tablet with shorthand notes.

The old man snubbed out his twelfth cigarette and shook his head, tugging at one of his big earlobes with yellowed fingertips.

Through the open windows, Hannah could hear the rain against the leaves of the sycamores whose branches brushed the screens of the old man’s cabin. “You say that you’ve been in the house, but I don’t know if you caught that geography,” he said. “He killed himself directly under Mary’s room. A slight variation in choke and the shot that pulped his cranial vault might have imbedded itself in Mary’s broadening backside. His pineal gland might have lodged in her rectum.”

Hannah smiled in spite of herself. “I did know that, as a matter of fact — I mean, how he killed himself right under Mary’s bedroom. There are in fact those who believe his death scene’s proximity to the place where she lay sleeping reveals the suicide was some sort of attack against Mary. Either for the grief she caused him at the end, or for hauling him across country to the Mayo and approving the electroshock treatment, or for leaving the keys out to the storeroom where his guns were stored — facilitating his forever promised suicide.” Hannah shrugged. “You know the theory — shame on Mary for greasing the grooves, and so forth.”

Maury McCaulley, a man who somehow successfully contrived to remain friends with Papa, Martha and Mary Hemingway, laughed and lit another cigarette with his

shaking, nicotine-stained fingers. Hannah was certain the old man — who had written a reputation-repairing profile of Papa in the early 1950s when it was badly needed — had dressed specially for her, and he was obviously made uncomfortable by the necktie that he had been incrementally loosening since their interview began. Now the stained, striped tie was half-opened and badly askew; the right wing of the old man's checkered collar stood up crookedly, brushing his spottily shaven set of chins. It was humid in the cabin, and the old man's worn corduroy sports jacket was months out of season. McCaulley kept the jacket on, despite Hannah's encouragement that he discard it.

“What were Ernest and Mary like, together, during the late 1950s and early '60s?”

“They were *horrible* together,” he said, laughing and shaking his head. “Mary was in no way, shape or form in Ernest's intellectual weight class — not remotely close. God knows what small talk over drinks in the Finca must have been like when it was just the two of them.”

The old man made a face and shook his head, his big ears waving. “She is, by all reports, mostly lushed up now.”

Maury tapped the long ash off his cigarette and ran a shaking hand back across his slicked back, thinning white hair. His front teeth were slightly gapped and bucked, but at least they were obviously his own and that somehow heartened Hannah. He frowned. “Jesus, do you want a drink, sweetie-pie? You said you're from around Glencoe — a Highlander, right? I might have some Talisker around.”

“No, thanks. I hate Scotch, betrayal of my heritage that that might be. And I'm nursing.”

“Jesus, right. Sorry.”

Hannah tucked her long blonde hair back behind her ears. “You pointed out he shot himself directly under Mary’s bed when he might simply have stayed in the cellar where the guns were stored.”

The old man’s forehead wrinkled and his eyes were bright and unblinking. “Yes. Yes I did.”

“You agree there could be some truth in the supposition that the suicide could be construed as an attack upon Mary — murder by proxy, if you will.”

“Yes.”

“You were one of the first Mary called after the shooting, aye?”

“Aye....” The old man smiled. “I mean, *yes*.”

Hannah wet her bee-stung lower lip. “Frankly, Mary’s rationale for locking up his guns, then leaving the key to the guns and ammo in plain sight defies logic.”

McCaulley nodded. “Sure. Of course. Doesn’t make a damned bit of sense. Never has.”

“Unless,” Hannah hesitated, “unless perhaps Mary somehow *wanted* him to shoot himself. By all accounts, she was at her wit’s end with him. It wasn’t as if the other wives or his sons were there to support her through his increasing dementia. Maybe it was all too much for her. For anyone. Do you think there could be anything to that line of reasoning?”

The old elf snubbed out his cigarette. Groaning and cracking, he pulled himself up with shaking arms and stretched. He slipped off his jacket and let it fall in a heap on the floor at his feet. Like many old men, his pants were hiked up well above his waist — his

belt buckle nearly centered between his nipples. He sat back down and rubbed his eyes.

His voice was hoarse: “Yes,” he said.

Hannah sat forward. “Really?”

“Nobody has ever asked me that point-blank before — whether Mary more or less stage-managed the suicide. Based on what I know, and what she said in that first, nerve-shattered phone call — when she was too rattled to put any spin on her story — yes, she truly did want him to do it. She really couldn’t take it anymore. If your question is whether Mary made Ernest’s suicide possible for him, then the answer is that she certainly did.” The old man shook his head. “There at the end, Mary made it possible for him to do it as surely as if she had pulled both triggers herself.”

Hannah hesitated. “Might she...have done just that?”

The old man looked startled. “Jesus. Might she have shot him, you mean?”

Hannah’s heart pounded. “That’s my question.”

The old man laughed and shook his head. He started to light another cigarette, then paused, the just-struck kitchen match still flaring between his fingers. He shook out the match, his cigarette unlit. He stared off into space. “Heh, funny,” he said. “Jesus. Never really thought of that scenario before.”

Hannah leaned forward, brow furrowed. “Possible?”

The old man didn’t look at her. “Heh. *Maybe.*”

The old man’s eyes locked with Hannah’s. He turned his head on side, smiling crookedly. “Maybe very very very very very very very very remotely.”

Hannah was out on the limb: “I know a couple of men who believe she maybe did it.”

The old man swallowed, still staring into Hannah's eyes. "Jesus."

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