THE LONE GUNMAN THEORY

If Kennedy wouldn't get back Cuba, then someone in the CIA would. In the spring of '63, the agents gathered in Texas to construct the perfect conspiracy

By DON DELILLO

Illustration by Bill Vuskanovitch

NICHOLAS BRANCH SITS in the book-filled room, the room of documents, the room of theories and dreams. He is in the fifteenth year of his labor and sometimes wonders if he is becoming bodiless. He knows he is getting old. There are times when he can't concentrate on the facts at hand and has to come back again and again to the page, the line, the fine-grained detail of a particular afternoon. He wanders in and out of these afternoons, the bright hot skies that give tone and depth to narrow data. He falls asleep sometimes, slumped in the chair, a hand curled on the broadloom rug. This is the room of growing old, the fireproof room, paper everywhere.

But he knows where everything is. From a stack of folders that reaches halfway up a wall, he smartly plucks the one he wants. The stacks are everywhere. The legal pads and cassette tapes are everywhere. The books fill tall shelves along three walls and cover the desk, a table, and much of the floor. There is a massive file cabinet stuffed with documents so old and densely packed they may be ready to ignite spontaneously. Heat and light. There is no formal system to help him track the material in the room. He uses hand and eye, color and shape and memory, the configuration of suggestive things that link an object to its contents. He wakes up suddenly, wondering where he is.

Sometimes he looks around him, horrified by the weight of it all, the career of paper. He sits in the data-spew of hundreds of lives. There's no end in sight. When he needs something, a report or transcript, anything, any level of difficulty, he simply has to ask. The Curator is quick to respond, firm in his insistence on forwarding precisely the right document in an area of research marked by ambiguity and error, by

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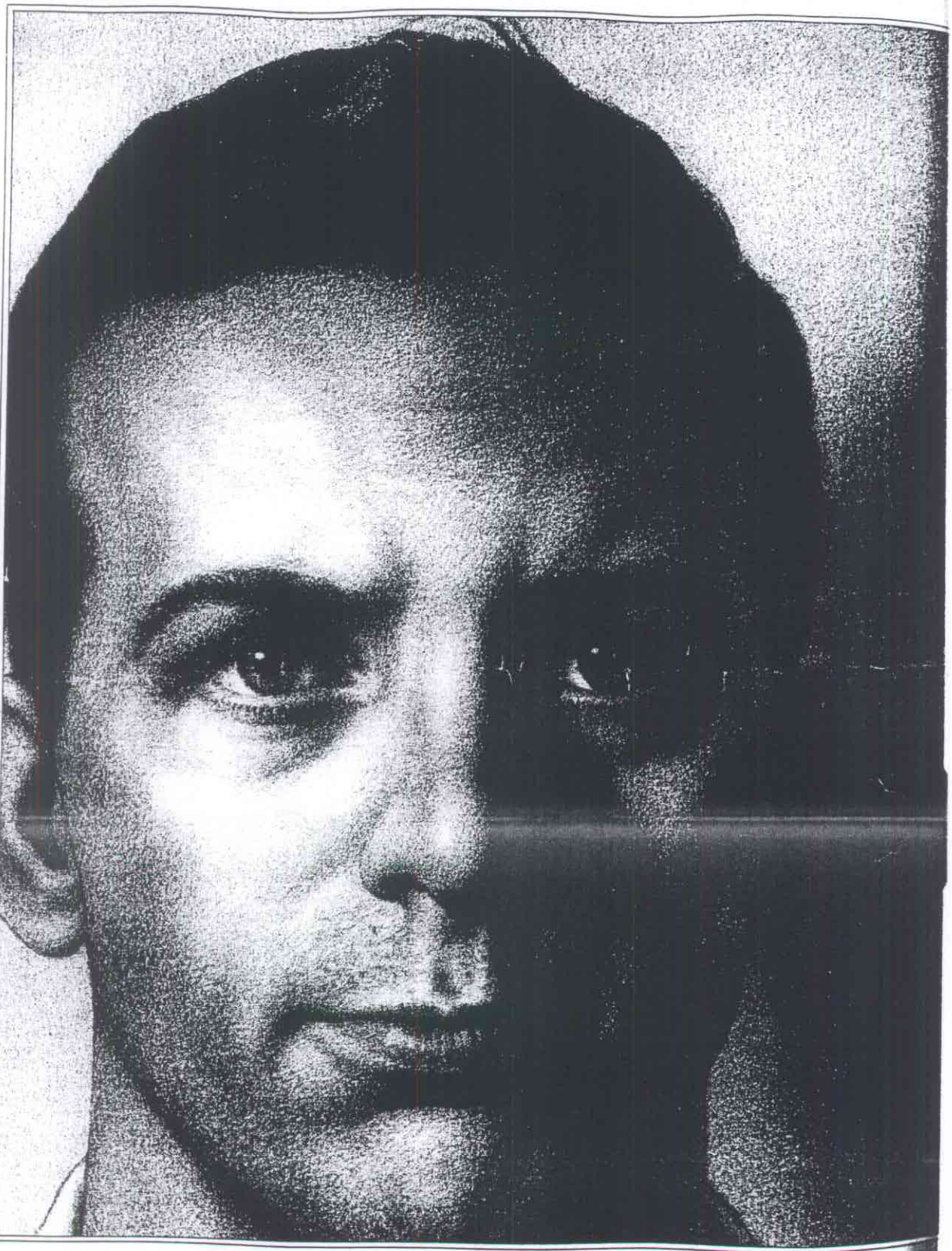

political bias, systematic fantasy. But not just the right document, not just an obscure footnote from an open source. The Curator sends him material not seen by anyone outside the headquarters complex at Langley, material that includes the results of internal investigations, confidential files from the Agency's own Office of Security. Branch hasn't met the current Curator and doubts that he ever will. They talk on the telephone, terse as snowbirds but unfailingly polite, fellow bookmen after all.

Nicholas Branch in his glove-leather armchair is a retired senior analyst of the Central Intelligence Agency, hired on contract to write the secret history of the assassination of President Kennedy. Six point nine seconds of heat and light. Let's call a meeting to analyze the blur. Let's devote our lives to understanding this moment, separating the elements of each crowded second. We will build theories that gleam like jade idols, intriguing systems of assumption, four-faced, graceful. We will follow the bullet trajectories backward to the lives that occupy the shadows, actual men who moan in their dreams. Elm Street. A woman wonders why she is sitting on the grass, blood spray all around. Tenth Street. A witness leaves her shoes on the hood of a bleeding policeman's car. A strangeness, Branch feels, that is almost holy. There is much here that is holy, an aberration in the heartland of the real. Let's regain our grip on things.

He enters a date on the home computer the Agency has provided for the sake of convenient tracking. April 17, 1963. The names appear at once, with backgrounds, connections, locations. The bright hot skies. The shady street of handsome old homes framed in native oak.

AMERICAN KITCHENS. This one has a breakfast nook, where a man named Walter Everett Jr. was sitting, thinking—Win, as he was called—lost to the morning noises collecting around him, a stir of the all-familiar, the heartbeat mosaic of every happy home, toast springing up, radio voices with their intimate and busy timbre, an optimistic buzz living in the ear. The *Record-Chronicle* was at his elbow, still fresh in its newsboy fold. Images wavered in the sunlit trim of appliances, something always moving, a brightness flying, so much to know in the world. He stirred the coffee, thought, stirred, sat in the wide light, spoon dangling now, a gentle and tentative man, it would be fair to say, based solely on appearance.

He was thinking about secrets. Why do we need them and what do they mean? His wife was reaching for the sugar.

He had important thoughts at breakfast. He had thoughts at lunch in his office in the Old Main Building. In the evening he sat on the porch, thinking. He believed it was a natural law that men with secrets tend to be drawn to one another, not because they want to share what they know but because they need the company of the like-minded, the fellow-afflicted—a respite from the other life, from the eerie realness of living with people who do not keep secrets as a profession or duty, or a business fixed to one's existence.

Let's devote our lives to understanding this moment.... We will follow the bullet trajectories backward to the lives that occupy the shadows, actual men who moan in their dreams.

Mary Frances watched him butter the toast. He held the edges of the slice in his left hand, moved the knife in systematic strokes, over and over. Was he trying to distribute the butter evenly? Or were there other, deeper requirements? It was sad to see him lost in small business, eternally buttering, turning routine into empty compulsion, without meaning or need.

She knew how to worry reasonably. She knew how to use the sound of her own voice to bring him back to what was safe and plain, among the breakfast dishes, on the tenth straight sunny day.

"One of the nicest things to watch? And I've never really noticed till we moved here? People coming out of church. Just gathering near the steps and talking. Isn't it one of the best things to watch?"

"You thought you'd find outlaws down here."

"I like it here. You're the one."

"Men swaggering into saloons. Thirsty from cattle drives."

"I mean churches anywhere. I just never paid attention before."

"I like to watch people come out of motels."

"No, but I'm serious. There's something lovely about a church lawn or church steps with the service just ended and people slowly coming out and forming little groups. They look so nice."

"That's what I didn't like about Sundays when I was growing up. All the frumpy people in their starchy clothes. Depressed the hell out of me."

"What's wrong with frumpy? I like being a middle-aged frump."

"I didn't mean you."

He reached across the table and touched her arm as he always did when he thought he might have said something wrong or cut her off. Don't listen to what I say. Trust my hands, my touch. "It's so comfortable," she said.

We tend to draw together to seek mutual solace for our disease. This is what he thought at the breakfast table in the sweet old house, turn-of-the-century, with the curved porch, the oak posts furled in trumpet vines. He had time to think, time to become an old man in aspic, in sculptured soap, quaint and white. It was not unusual for men in the clandestine service to retire at age fifty-one. A pension plan had been approved by some committee and a statement had been issued about the onerous and dangerous lives led by such people; the family problems; the transient nature of assignments. But Win Everett's retirement wasn't exactly voluntary. There was the business in Coral Gables. There were visits to the polygraph machine. And from three levels of specialists he heard the term "motivational exhaustion." Two were CIA psychiatrists, the other a cleared contact in the outside world, the place he found so eerie and real.

They called it semiretirement. A semantic kindness. They set him up in a teaching post here and paid him a retainer to recruit likely students as junior officer trainees. In a college for women, this was a broad comic thrust even Win could appreciate in a bitter and self-punishing way, as if he were still on their side, watching himself from a distance.

This is what we end up doing, he thought. Spying on ourselves. We are at the mercy of our own detachment. A thought for breakfast.

He folded the lightly toasted slice, ready at last to eat. In his ordinary body she saw the power of conviction. A lean and easy

frame. A mild face, clear eyes, high and sad and mottled forehead. There was a burning faith in this man, a sense of cause. Mary Frances saw this more clearly than ever now that he'd been sent away from the councils and planning groups, the task forces, the secret training sites. Deprived of real duties, of contact with the men and events that informed his zeal, he was becoming all principle, all zeal. She was afraid he would turn into one of those men who make a saintliness of their resentment, shining through the years with a pure and tortured light. The radio said high 70s. God is alive and well in Texas.

Suzanne came in, hungry all over again, their six-year-old. She stood with her head propped against her daddy's arm, feet crossed in a certain way, half-sullen, a routine bid for attention. She had her mother's matter-of-fact blondness, hair thick and wiry, her face paler than Mary Frances's, without the wind-roughened texture. Because they had wanted a child but had given up hope, she was a sign of something unselfish in the world, some greathearted force that could turn their smallness into admiring awe. Win gathered her in, allowing her to collapse dramatically. He fed her the rest of his toast and made slobbering sounds while she chewed, his gray eyes excited. Mary Frances listened to *Life Line* on KDNT, a commentary on the need for parents to be more vigilant in checking what their children read and watch and listen to.

"Danger everywhere," said the grim voice.

Win tapped his breast pocket for a cigarette. Suzanne hurried out, hearing the school bus. A silence fell, the first of the day's pauses, the first small exhaustion. Then Mary Frances in her Viyella robe began to remove things from the table, a series of light clear sounds hanging in the air, discreet as handbells.

THE TWO MEN SAT in Win Everett's temporary office in the basement of the Old Main, under a weak and twitchy fluorescent light. Win was in shirt-sleeves, smoking, eager to talk, surprised and a little dismayed at the high anticipation he felt, sharing news with a former colleague face-to-face.

Carpenters worked in the hallway, men with close-cropped hair and poky drawls, calling to each other under the steam ducts.

Laurence Parmenter leaned forward in his chair, a tall broad man in a blue oxford shirt and dark suit. He showed a vigor even in repose, his blond hair touched with silver at the sideburns, and he had the air of a man who wishes to conduct business, affably, over jokes and drinks. Win thought he was an impressive sort of fellow, self-assured, well-connected, one of the men behind the crisp and scintillating coup in Guatemala in 1954, a collector of vintage wines, friend and fellow veteran of the Bay of Pigs.

"My God, they buried you."

"Texas Woman's University. Savor the name."

"What do you teach?"

"History and economics. Somebody in the DDP asked me to check out promising students for them. Foreign girls in particular. If there's a future prime minister here, the idea is we recruit her now while she's still a virgin."

She was afraid he'd turn into one of those men who make a saintliness of their resentment, shining through the years with a pure and tortured light. Mary Frances saw this.

"Christamighty."

"First they hand me over to the psychiatrists," Win said. "Then they send me into exile. What country is this anyway?"

They both laughed.

"I say the name to myself all the time. I let it flow over me. I linger in its aura."

"Texas Woman's University," Parmenter whispered almost reverently.

Win sat nodding. He and Larry Parmenter had belonged to a group called SE Detailed, six military analysts and intelligence men. The group was one element in a four-stage committee set up to confront the problem of Castro's Cuba. The first stage, the Senior Study Effort, consisted of fourteen high officials, including presidential advisers, ranking military men, special assistants, undersecretaries, heads of intelligence. They met for an hour and a half. Then eleven men left the room, six men entered. The resulting group, called SE Augmented, met for two hours. Then seven men left, four men entered, including Everett and Parmenter. This was SE Detailed, a group that developed specific covert operations and then decided which members of SE Augmented ought to know about these plans. Those members in turn wondered whether the Senior Study Effort wanted to know what was going on in stage three. Chances are they didn't. When the meeting in stage three was over, five men left the room and three paramilitary officers entered to form Leader 4. Win Everett was the only man present at both the third and fourth stages.

"Could actually be worse," Parmenter said. "At least you're still in."

"I'd love to be out, completely, once and for all."

"And do what?"

"Start my own firm. Consult."

"On what, secret invasions?"

"That's one problem. I'm something of a tainted commodity. The other difficulty is I have precious little instinct for business ventures. I know how to teach. CIA has a picture of my prelapsarian soul in their files. They looked at it and sent me here."

"They kept you on. That's the point. They understand more deeply than you think they do."

"I'd love to be out forever. As long as I'm here, I still work for them, even though it's all a poor sick joke."

"They'll bring you back, Win."

"Do I want to be brought back? I don't like the kind of double-minded feeling I have about this thing. Despise them on the one hand; crave their love and understanding on the other."

Knowledge was a danger, ignorance a cherished asset. In many cases the DCI, the Director of Central Intelligence, was not to know important things. The less he knew, the more decisively he could function. It would impair his ability to tell the truth at an inquiry or hearing, or in an Oval Office chat with the President, if he knew what they were doing in Leader 4, or even what they were talking about, or muttering in their sleep. The Joint Chiefs were not to know. The operational horrors were not for their ears. Details were a form of contamination. The Secretaries were to be insulated from knowing. They were happier not knowing, or knowing too late. The Deputy Secretaries were interested in drifts and tendencies. They expected to be misled. They counted on it. The Attorney General wasn't to know the queasy details. Just

get results. Each level of the committee was designed to protect a higher level. There were complexities of speech. A man needed special experience and insight to work true meanings out of certain murky remarks. There were pauses and blank looks. Brilliant riddles floated up and down the echelons, to be pondered, solved, ignored. It had to be this way, Win admitted to himself. The men at his level were spawning secrets that quivered like reptile eggs. They were planning to poison Castro's cigars. They were designing cigars equipped with microexplosives. They had a poison pen in the works. They were conspiring with organized crime figures to send assassins to Havana, poisoners, snipers, saboteurs. They were testing a botulin toxin on monkeys. Fidel would be seized by cramps, vomiting, and fits of coughing, just like the long-tailed primates, and horribly die. Have you ever seen a monkey coughing uncontrollably? Gruesome. They wanted to put fungus spores in his scuba suit. They were devising a seashell that would explode when he went swimming.

The members of the committee would allow only generalities to carry upward. It was the President, of course, who was the final object of their protective instincts. They all knew that JFK wanted Castro cooling on a slab, but they weren't allowed to let on to him that his guilty yearning was the business they'd charged themselves to carry out. The White House was to be the summit of unknowing. It was as if an unsullied leader redeemed some ancient truth that the others were forced to admire only in the abstract, owing to their mission in the convoluted world.

But there were even deeper shadows, strange and grave silences surrounding plans to invade the island. The President knew about this, of course—knew the broad contours, had a sense of the promised outcome. But the system still operated as an insulating muse. Let him see the softer tones. Shield him from responsibility. Secrets build their own networks, Win believed. The system would perpetuate itself in all its curious and obsessive webbings, its equivocations and patient riddles and levels of delusional thought, at least until the men were on the beach.

After the Bay of Pigs, nothing was the same. Win spent the spring of '61 traveling between Miami, Washington, and Guatemala City to close out different segments of the operation, get drunk with station chiefs and advisers, try to explain to exile leaders what went wrong. It was the unraveling of the plot, the first weeks of a wreckage whose life-span he seemed determined to prolong at the risk of his own well-being, as if he wanted to compensate for the half measures that had brought about defeat. A new committee replaced the old, structured less cleverly, although many of the same men, to no one's shocked surprise, took chairs in the paneled room. The death of Fidel Castro was the small talk once more. But SE Detailed and Leader 4 would not take part. The groups were disbanded, their members marked not as failed plotters and operatives but as the Americans in the invasion array who had the deepest personal involvement in the exiles' cause. It was precisely the true believers who must be removed. Their contact with the exile leaders, their work in assembling and training the assault brigade, had made these men overresponsive to policy shifts, light-sensitive, unpredictable. All this was unspoken, of course. The groups simply disappeared and the members were given scattered duties unrelated to Castro's Cuba, the moonlit fixation in the emerald sea.

They were planning to poison Castro's cigars. They had a poison pen in the works. They wanted to put fungus spores in his scuba suit. They were devising a seashell to explode.

Interestingly, some of the men continued to meet.

"Will he find us?"

"I have a feeling he's already here," Win said.

"My plane leaves at 5:25."

"He'll find us."

They sat at the lunch counter in Shraders Pharmacy on the courthouse square. Win stirred his coffee, thought, sat, stirred. Larry kept ducking in his seat to get a better look at the Denton County courthouse, a limestone building of mixed and vigorous character, with turrets, pediments, pink granite columns, pointed domes, roof balustrades, Second Empire pavilions.

"I look at these ornate old buildings in bustling town squares and I find them full of a hopefulness I think I cherish. Look at the thing. It's so imposing. Imagine a man at the turn of the century coming to a small southwestern town and seeing a building like this. What stability and civic pride. It's an optimistic architecture. It expects the future to make as much sense as the past."

Win said nothing.

"I'm talking about the American past," Larry said, "as we naively think of it, which is the one kind of innocence I endorse."

The subject ostensibly was Cuba. They met several times in an apartment in Coral Gables, a place Parmenter had used to brief Cuban pilots on their way to Nicaragua. They talked about maintaining contacts in the exile community, setting up a network in the Castro government. They were five men who could not let go of Cuba. But they were also an outlawed group. This gave their meetings a self-referring character. Things turned inward. There was only one secret that mattered now and that was the group itself.

"Only be a minute," Win said.

They walked under a canopy and went into the long dark interior of the hardware store, a place of lost and reproachful beauty, with displays of frontier tools and ancient weighing machines, where Win often came to walk the two aisles like a tourist in waist-high ruins, expanded and sad. He had to remind himself it was only hardware. He bought a paint scraper, and when they got back to Larry's rented car, parked off the square, they saw a figure in the front seat, passenger side, a broad-shouldered man in a loud sport shirt. This was T. J. Mackey, a cowboy type to Win's mind but probably the most adept of the men in Leader 4, a veteran field officer who'd trained exiles in assault weapons and supervised early phases of the landings.

Parmenter got behind the wheel, humming something that amused him. Win sat in the middle of the rear seat, giving directions. With Mackey here, the day took on purpose. T. J. did not bring news of hirings and firings, the births of babies. He was one of the men the Cubans would follow without question. He was also the only man who refused to sign a letter of reprimand when the secret meetings in Coral Gables were monitored by the Office of Security. If a monumental canvas existed of the five grouped conspirators, a painting that showed them with knit brows and twisted

torsos, darkly scheming men being confronted by crew-cut security agents in khaki suits with natural shoulders, it might be titled *Light Entering the Cave of the Ungodly*. Parmenter and two others signed letters of reprimand that were placed in their personnel files. Win signed a letter and also agreed to a technical interview, or polygraph exam. He signed a quitclaim, stating that he was taking the test voluntarily. He signed a secrecy agreement, stating that he would talk to no one about the test. When he failed the polygraph, security men sealed his office, a small room with a blue door on the fourth floor of the Agency's new headquarters at Langley. In the office they found telephone notes and documents that seemed to indicate, amid the usual ambiguities, that Win Everett was putting people of his own into Zenith Technical Enterprises, the burgeoning Miami firm that provided cover for the CIA's new wave of operations against Cuba. It was a little too much. First he heads a group that ignores orders to disband. Then he runs a private operation inside the Agency's own vast and layered industry of anti-Castro activities. When Win took a second polygraph he sat at the desk apparatus sobbing, after three questions, the electrodes planted in his palm, the cuff around his bicep, the rubber tube traversing his chest. It was such an effort not to lie.

They drove south out of Denton into deep green country. There were pastures abandoned to mesquite and juniper, places of sudden starkness, a burning glare, a single squat tree, burled and grim. The sky towered unbearably here.

Mackey sat with his right arm out the window, hanging down along the door. He showed no interest in the scenic details of the ride. They passed a Baptist church set on cinder blocks. He responded to remarks with a faint tilt of the head, a raised jaw, to show agreement or amusement.

Parmenter said, "There must be people in these old graveyards who came out on the wagon trains. Circuit riders, Indian fighters. It's pretty country, Win. What the hell. Why don't you settle in, raise your little girl, sign up for the concert and drama series. The school is bound to have one. No, I mean it."

Eyes in the rearview mirror.

The psychiatrists were not unkind. But they made him aware of illness and disease. They carried disease with them. They were ill themselves. There were areas of their faces they'd neglected to shave carefully. He didn't have the heart to tell them. They were nice men but incomplete, or too complete. He saw the microscopic hairs so clearly. Motivational fatigue. The Agency was tolerant of such problems. The Agency understood. The truth was he hadn't placed agents in Zenith Technical Enterprises. His old team was already there, working with new case officers, prepared to run sea raids from secret bases in the Keys. But the evidence, thin, sketchy, incidental, was too far-reaching in principle to be convincingly denied by a man in his condition. It was easier to believe than deny. They'd deciphered his notes, read his typewriter ribbons. Could he tell them he loved Cuba, knew the language and the literature? They had the contents of his burn bags. How could he make them see there was nothing to his scheme but the marginal notes of a diehard and fool?

When he failed the polygraph, security men sealed his office. They found telephone notes and documents indicating that Win Everett was putting people of his own into Zenith.

He took off his jacket, folded it lengthwise and then top to bottom and dropped it on the seat next to him. He tapped his shirt pocket for a cigarette.

They went along a farm-to-market road and crossed the Old Alton Bridge, over Hickory Creek. Win indicated a right turn. They went down a red dirt road that ran a quarter of a mile under a thick canopy of post oaks and hickories. Woods on one side, pasture on the other. Larry eased the car to a stop alongside the rail fence. Win lit a cigarette, leaning forward from the middle of the seat. The two men up front sat with their heads tilted slightly toward him, although neither turned at any time to look back.

"When my daughter tells me a secret," Win said, "her hands get very busy. She takes my arm, grabs me by the shirt collar, pulls me close, pulls me into her life. She knows how intimate secrets are. She likes to tell me things before she goes to sleep. Secrets are an exalted state, almost a dream state. They're a way of arresting motion, stopping the world so we can see ourselves in it. This is why you're here. All I had to do was provide a place and time. You came without asking why. You didn't consider the risks to your careers, associating with Walter Everett Jr. after what's happened. You're here because there's something vitalizing in a secret. My little girl is generous with secrets. I wish she weren't, frankly. Don't secrets sustain her, keep her separate, make her self-aware? How can she know who she is if she gives away her secrets?"

The two men waited.

"The invasion failed because high officials didn't examine the basic assumptions. They got caught up in a spirit of compelling action. They were eager to accept other men's perceptions. There was safety in this. The plan was never clear. No one was ever responsible. Some of them knew a disaster was in the works. They let it ride. They put themselves out of reach. They wanted it over and done. There was pressure to get all those armed exiles out of Florida into goddamn Cuba. I'm not sure anybody thought about what happens to them after we drop them off at the beach. That's where we came in. We were on the airfields or the ships or we were locked in barracks with the exile leaders. They had brothers and sons among the dead and there were armed American soldiers keeping them from leaving the barracks at Opa-Locka. What could I tell those men? I felt like a messenger of plague and death. Then the long slow fall. I wanted to sanctify the failure, make it everlasting. If we couldn't have success, let's make the most of our failure. That's what we were doing at the end when we tried to keep things going. Just an empty exercise."

They waited. They were patient and attentive.

"The movement needs to be brought back to life. These operations the Agency is running out of the Keys are strictly pinpricks. We need an electrifying event. JFK is moving toward a settling of differences with Castro. On the one hand he believes the revolution is a disease that could spread through Latin America. On the other hand he's denouncing guerrilla raids and trying to get brigade members to join the U.S. Army, where someone can keep an eye on them. If we want a second invasion, a full-bore attempt this time, without restrictions

or conditions, we have to do something soon. We have to move the Cuban matter past the edge of all these sweet maneuverings. We need an event that will excite and shock the exile community, the whole country. We know Cuban intelligence has people in Miami. We want to set up an event that will make it appear they have struck at the heart of our government. This is a time for high risks. I'm saying be done with half measures, be done with evasion and delay."

A pickup came down the road and they rolled up their windows to keep the dust out. The driver gave a half wave without taking his hand off the wheel. They waited for the dust to settle, then rolled down the windows. Win paused a moment before beginning to speak again.

"Some things we wait for all our lives without knowing it. Then it happens and we recognize at once who we are and how we are meant to proceed. This is the idea I've always wanted. I believe you'll sense it is right. It's the high risk we need. We need an electrifying event. You've been waiting for this every bit as much as I have. I believe that, or I wouldn't have asked you to come here. We want to set up an attempt on the life of the President. We plan every step, design every incident leading up to the event. We put together a team, leave a dim trail. The evidence is ambiguous. But it points to the Cuban Intelligence Directorate. Inherent in the plan is a second set of clues, even more unclear, more intriguing. These point to the Agency's attempts to assassinate Castro. I am designing a plan that includes elements of both the American provocation and the Cuban reply. We do the whole thing with paper. Passports, driver's licenses, address books. Shots ring out. The country is shocked, aroused. Our shooters disappear, but the police find a trail. It leads to a single individual. We script him out of ordinary pocket litter. Mail-order forms, change-of-address cards. He is a man with a history of leftist involvement. I am convinced this is what we have to do to get Cuba back. The plan has levels and variations I've only begun to explore, but it is already, essentially, right. I feel its rightness. I know what scientists mean when they talk about elegant solutions. This plan speaks to something very deep inside me. It has a powerful logic. I've felt it unfolding for weeks, like a dream whose meaning slowly becomes apparent. This is the condition we have always wanted to reach. It's the life insight, the life secret, and we have to extend it, guard it carefully, right up to the time when we have shooters stationed on a rooftop or railroad bridge."

There was a silence. Then Parmenter said dryly: "We couldn't hit Castro. So let's hit Kennedy. I wonder if that's the hidden motive here."

"But we don't hit Kennedy. We miss him," Win said.

"We do it with paper," he said. "Passports, driver's licenses, address books. Shots ring out. The country is aroused. Our shooters disappear, but the police find a trail."

AFTER DARK THE STILLNESS FALLS, the hour of withdrawal, houses in shadow, the street a private place, a set of mysteries. Whatever we know about our neighbors is hushed and lulled by the deep repose. It becomes a form of intimacy, jasmine-scented, that deceives us into trustfulness.

Win was in the living room turning the pages of a book. This is what he did, according to his wife, instead of reading. Turned pages until there were no more. He wondered whether the two men realized he'd called them here specifically for April 17, the second anniversary of the Bay of Pigs. A thought for bedtime. He turned another page.

Upstairs Mary Frances was in bed. She worried about the worn-out rug, thought about breakfast, thought about lunch, tried not to be too foolishly proud of the renovated kitchen, large, handsome, efficient, with its frostless freezer and color-matched appliances, on the quiet street of oak and pecan trees, forty miles north of Dallas.

NICHOLAS BRANCH SITS looking at the paper hills around him. Paper is beginning to slide out of the room and across the doorway to the house proper. The floor is covered with books and folders. The closet is stuffed with material he has yet to read. He has to wedge new books into the shelves, force them in, squeeze everything, keep everything. There is nothing in the room he can discard as irrelevant or out-of-date. It all matters on one level or another. This is the room of lonely facts. The stuff keeps coming.

The Curator sends thirty more volumes from the CIA's 144-volume file on Lee H. Oswald. He sends cartons of investigative reports and trial transcripts. He sends documents withheld from ordinary investigators or heavily censored. He sends new books all the time, each with a gleaming theory, supportable, assured.

The FBI's papers on the assassination are here, 125,000 pages, no end of dread and woe.

The Curator sends FBI surveillance logs. He sends feature films and documentaries, transcripts of panel discussions and radio debates. Branch has no choice but to study this material. He is in too deep to be selective.

The documents are stacked everywhere. He has homicide reports and autopsy diagrams. He has the results of spectrographic tests on bullet fragments. He has reports by acoustical consultants and experts in blur analysis. He studies blurs himself, stooped over photos taken in Dealey Plaza by people who thought they were there to see the Head of State come riding nicely by. He has a magnifier. He has maps of photographers' lines of sight.

The Curator sends a special FBI report that includes detailed descriptions of *dreams*—dreams reported by eyewitnesses following the assassination of Kennedy and the murder of Oswald.

Branch sits under a lap robe and worries. The truth is he hasn't written all that much. He has extensive and overlapping notes—notes in three-foot drifts, all these years of notes. But of actual finished prose, there is precious little. It is impossible to stop assembling data. There are lives he must examine, theories to evaluate. The lone gunman theory, the second Oswald theory, the organized crime theory. He reads into the night. He sleeps in the armchair. There are times when he thinks he can't go on. He feels disheartened, almost immobilized by the constant flow of data. But he persists, he works on, he jots his notes. He knows he can't get out. The case will haunt him to the end. Of course they've known it all along. That's why they built this room for him, the room of growing old, the room of theories and dreams. ◘