

From *Three Jacks*, a novel

Darrell Spencer

SUNRISE, FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 22, 1963, not yet but about to be one ugly day in U.S. history, and standing over there about to climb into the family Nova was my dad, Jack, the man suffering—in words he stole from his own dad—the discomfort of a buffalo in a shoe box, so from where I was unlocking my own car, an Impala I bought off a mechanic who owned a gas station up on Las Vegas Boulevard, and which was parked side by side to the Nova in our garage, I could see Jack about mid-chest up, mighty in the shoulders and he stood so you noticed. The problem today was what he called rotten-egg thinking. A dream woke him at three a.m. It had to do with something bad happening to me. Jack was looking like the rattled folk you see on the TV news. Had those eyes. He stood by the Nova and said, “It has me spooked is all I can tell you. It’s not like it’s a nightmare you can blame on bad food, and I can’t pin it down to a this or that, or tell you what’s going to happen, but stay on your toes.” He looked toward the ceiling—there was a storage attic above us—but he couldn’t shuck what had lodged itself in his bones.

I swung the Impala’s door wide open. The car was a package of glory, black and red and white body, tuck-and-roll upholstery, bucket seats. It was the vehicle you would hot-wire and take on a rampage across New Mexico. It had, like a raised and clenched fist, a four-on-the-floor Hurst. On the dash, a tach. For the world to covet, chrome reverse wheels you could eat off. Jack buzzed the big garage door open, moseyed a few feet down the driveway, and collected the *Las Vegas Sun* from where it got tossed under the oleanders. He said, “The news two bits buys ain’t worth a plugged nickel” and flipped the newspaper at the front door. He acted puzzled, a grinding there above his eyes, as if he was chewing ashes.

The day Lee Harvey Oswald shot Mr. Jack Kennedy was here.

My dad called us Three Jacks, me and him and the President, who

was Jack to my Dad. The two of them met in Carson City in the early sixties. Senator Kennedy then. Dad and Jack sat under a weeping willow tree at the Governor's mansion, guests of Grant Sawyer. They sipped whiskey and imagined Nevada's future. Dad told me he and Jack Kennedy talked the same language.

So it was Jack Fixx and his boy Jack Fixx, and, even after he was elected, if Jack Kennedy came West, he telephoned my dad. I picked up one day, heard, "Jack?" One word, and the accent, the noises money and education make. One word, and it made me want to get smart. It made me think I could read books, adjust my posture, and buy the right shoes, be something other than the Jack Fixx I was. I said, "He's out." I remembered my manners and said, "May I take a message?" I wanted Jack Kennedy to say some more words, there being every chance I might catch whatever it was he had.

He said, "Tell him the Senator called."

"You're the President," I said. Took guts to speak up. Like giving away a secret you're privy to.

He said, "Only to the rest of the country."

Like I was in on something beyond my years and range. I put the phone in its place and felt bigger.

The day Jack and I stood there by our cars was the year I turned eighteen and a couple of afternoons a week drove delivery for Jack's company, Southern Nevada Aire & Sheet Metal. My dad designed and installed refrigeration systems and sold equipment to most of the casinos in Las Vegas. It was about eight in the morning, and we were a few hours away from hearing that news about JFK. How many times have you seen the black-and-white footage, Walter Cronkite deflated, all the air gone out of him, a slow leaking of his soul, and he peels the glasses from his face, glances up and sideways to his right, like he's double checking the clock, and says that the report out of Dallas, Texas, is apparently true, informing the nation that President Kennedy died at one p.m. central standard time?

The garage door wide open, there was Jack, nailed to the spot where he fetched the morning paper. Antsy, though. Like a pal sneaked up and gave him a hot foot. Jack was trying to swallow his nerves whole. Tall, six-foot-five and bald, which he had always been, but today—because of the look on his face—his being so was itself a newsflash, was highlighted, as if he suffered a miscalculation in the a.m. and lost his hair in a split second at day break. The way he held himself made you think his head had been framed for hanging on a wall.

He dangled car keys from a finger. He was wearing a white shirt and a narrow dustybrown tie and his gold-dot clip centered in the wide part. His shoes were his best pair, brown lace-ups, which meant he was meeting someone about a bid, probably one of the casino buyers. His pants

were cuffed. You took a look in the back seat of the Nova, you would see his suit jacket laid out and nipped flat.

There were the Strip people. Then us, the townies, which, the saying went, was not so much a matter of where you lived or worked, but of what end of the stick you took hold of.

Jack said, "Keep your wits about you today."

"You got something specific in mind?" I said.

"It's under my skin is all I can say. Some kind of danger I'm seeing out of the corner of my eye."

"The sky is falling?" I stepped out and checked the heavens for Chicken Little. Didn't see the critter tumbling toward earth. We did that as a family, one hand in salute at our brow, us looking every which way. Eye-balls popped out. We made a show of it. Chicken Little was a family joke. It was our first step in dealing with trouble whether it was big or small.

Jack said, "It's more directed at you."

I said, "I'm about to step in front of a train?"

"That's more like it." He was perplexed. He said, "Something's wrong." Jack stood, so he looked like he was listening hard to a voice I couldn't hear. He said, "There's the dream, but there's something coming, and it's not good."

"You just being a kook?" I said.

Got his attention, like I was pulling him out of a trance. He said, "You're probably right."

I told him I could avoid a train, and he said he knew I could.

Jack was not a man who cried wolf. He was, in daylight, as no nonsense a handshaker as you'll ever meet, but I'll admit he also had a lot of hoodoo about him. He taught us not to put a left shoe on first. You didn't eat apples picked the day after a lightning storm. We got older, and we kidded him. How would you know when an apple was picked? we asked. His answer was we would know. Remained a mystery to me how. If you talked about good fortune, you jinxed it. If you talked about bad luck, you brought it down on yourself. You might as well ask the devil to lunch and invite him home to sleep in the guest room. Jack carried in his pocket, no matter what he wore or changed into, a five-dollar chip from the Horseshoe Club. The story he told us was he was down to it when he quit gambling for good. He didn't wear blue on any part of his body.

Jack opened the Nova's door and said, "There was trouble to do with you, so take it easy," and he narrowed his eyes like he had just come up out of the deep end of a swimming pool into sunlight. He said, "Keep looking over your shoulder."

I gave him my word.

Jack, a few years back, in his early fifties, took up the religion he was born to in Utah, the Mormons. He snapped his fingers and quit cigarettes. To his credit, he didn't call a meeting and announce it to the rest of

us. He didn't drag me or my mother into his reconversion. My sisters, except one, a year older than me, Wendy, were gone from the house, married and in other states. Wendy joined Jack. She got baptized. Then she married a Mormon herself. There was a day Jack was Jack, smoking a Lucky Strike. By afternoon he was a Latter-day Saint. The following morning I salvaged a carton of cigarettes from the garbage I was hauling out front. Jack did a jig and changed. Presto. Period. He hauled in a cardboard box from the garage, filled it with liquor and next day delivered free booze to his pals and the people who worked for him. He stopped drinking his Folger's. Like so much else in life, his return to the fold was a trade off. He relinquished some spark, collected weight that weakened his face, and his eyes faded a shade or two. He got harder to hear as a day went along.

Now, most mornings, he cooked a breakfast for me and him, and he left for work and I got myself to school. I drove the delivery truck Mondays and Fridays, part of a get-ready-for-the-real-world program you signed up for your senior year at Las Vegas High. Weekends and Tuesday through Thursday, after basketball practice, I stocked shelves at Vegas Village, a grocery store off Sahara Avenue and Maryland Parkway.

You need to understand that Jack and my mother were calling it quits. Divorce sat in the comers of our house, waiting to have its number called.

No sooner would the garage door shut and Jack and me drive off than Claire, my mother, would get up and wander down to her friend Betty's where they sat over coffee and talked until one or two. Betty suffered some illness that meant her body couldn't handle what she called the vicissitudes of the world before noon. She canceled the newspaper because it made her nervous. Claire said Betty had a problem with symmetry. You could see that struggle in the way she planted flowers and kept juggling the furniture in her home.

"You caught me," is what Claire said one day when I came by the house earlier than usual on my way to work, and she was turning up our driveway, returning, she told me, like a homing pigeon from Betty's. It hadn't occurred to me to wonder what my mother did when Jack and I left. And here she was out and about, which seemed to me to be no big deal, but she wanted to explain. Claire was wearing capris and flipflops. Her blouse, tied at the waist, was tulip red.

"At what?" I said.

She said, "Living outside the law."

I didn't get it. It wasn't like I discovered her sitting in a closet sipping at a bottle of Vodka.

"Betty's your mother's godsend," Claire said.

So, it was Friday, November 22, 1963. At Charleston Boulevard, behind me in the Nova, Jack continued straight ahead, and I turned right.

There my dad went in my rearview. What an upright creature he was on the planet, him and his two legs. The man as forthright as silver dollars. My girl, Karen, was waiting for me outside the Spudnut Shop. She tossed a sack of doughnuts in the Impala's open window and handed me two coffees. Still outside the car, she lit a cigarette, took two puffs, and flicked it to the ground. She hated the smell in her hair. She got in, and the first thing she said to me was, "Not yet."

I took a sip of my coffee and pulled into traffic. We were waiting on her period.

Mid-morning, getting to be lunch time, and the big joke in English was a sentence in our grammar book. The bell rang, and there was no Mr. Crowder yet. Odd, since he was always sitting at his desk at the front of the room. Joking with us. Shooting the bull. Craig Apple, sitting in the back in a corner, read the sentence out loud. *Mr. Williams asked Joel if he would bring him his rubbers from the mud room.*

Apple's sidekick, a kid everyone called Boots because he wore a brace on his foot to even out his legs, said, "Mr. Williams going to be knocking on Mrs. Williams' door."

A couple of the clowns clapped. Hooted. "In the mud room," a jock named Oliver said.

Kid off to the side named Jonathan wondered what a mudroom was.

And here was Mr. Crowder on the other side of the door, framed by its glass, our teacher putting himself together like an actor in the wings. Then he was inside, and something in the way he moved told us to shut up, which we normally didn't have to do, Crowder being one of the good guys who let how we talked in the hallway into the classroom. He skipped lessons some days and sat and shot the breeze, which usually ended with him quoting Shakespeare, only not serious but like he was always winking about what he was saying. You came in late, he didn't give you a slip and send you to the office. He said, "Ah, enter Puck." Always the "ah." We would get rolling on some subject and all fired up and compounding our angst, our teenagerness, and Crowder walked the aisles, quoting the man he called *the barb*. "Jack shall have Jill. Nought shall go ill," he would say. You could see his heart tapping its feet. The bell would ring, and he would say, "Ah, yes, exit Pucks." We would be on our way out, and he would be yakking, sometimes singing, about shadows and sleeping—slumber—and visions. Even the screw-ups liked Crowder.

He came in and stopped after a couple of steps, the door wide open behind him. He was empty of his usual cheer. Today's tie was green, one of those knit ones. Crowder kept a brush cut, hair so short it could look like a five-o'clock shadow. Right now, it was bristling, and he seemed as confused as Jack had been in the garage. Crowder hadn't really come into the room at all. He had no confidence in what he was doing, not

even in the support his feet gave him. Something was eating at the man from the inside out. He seemed to want to do significant things with his hands, only he couldn't. They weighed too much. He swiped at his mouth and said, "The President's been shot. They shot Kennedy. The President. Over in Dallas down there in Texas." Crowder wasn't seeing us at all. He said, "Sit. Sit." Not that we weren't. "You have homework," he said, and he left.

In the outside cafeteria, no Karen. Her crowd had gathered, like there had been a roll call. They came together at a table out from under the awning, there in the sun where they caught rays. No trespassing written all over them. Karen ran with girls who dated the car club hoods, who, indifference plastered to their faces, rode around in some guy's '56 or '57 Chevy, a name like Rockers or Crusaders lettered on the tail fins. At assemblies, which you had to attend, Karen and her pals sat in the bleachers and invented ways to flip off the cheerleaders down there on the floor. No way did you see them at a game. These were eighteen-year-old women who understood they had us and men twice our age and expertise by the short hairs. Except for Karen, they didn't associate with jocks. She took some crap because of me. Their hair was H-bomb chic. It was humped up and swept and stiff, and it moved as a unit. They wore frosty lipstick and occupied great spaces. The world was already a redundant and boring place to them.

Karen wasn't in line for lunch. "She's looking for you," Brenda told me. She put her arm through mine and was walking me toward the others. Her black hair curled along her jawbone, and then the swoop of it yanked itself clean over the top of her head. She said, "She's not feeling well, and it seems it's your fault."

"Where is she?" I said.

Vicki, a new addition to the crowd, a sophomore already evangelical in her beauty, said, "I saw her walking toward the parking lot."

Brenda said, "You know what they say about morning sickness."

I said, "The walls have ears."

"It means it's a girl," Brenda said. "If you have morning sickness, it's a girl."

"You can tell by the eyes," Vicki said. She pointed at hers and described what you checked for near the pupil. A crescent-moon shape meant a boy. A mark like a star meant a girl.

"Then there's watermelon hips," Margaret said.

Vicki said, "Versus basketball belly."

Brenda said, "Oh, god."

All of it the comedy they saw as life. I stepped from under the school's lunch area and into the parking lot near the football field, and there was Karen coming at me through the cars.

"Where are you?" she was saying. "Your car? Where is it?"

I told her I ended up behind the Mormon church.

"Take me home," she said.

"You sick?"

"Who said that?"

"Brenda."

In the car, Karen told me her friends were treating her like she was in a wheelchair. I asked her who she confided in, and she said Marcia. Big mistake, I was thinking, and Karen said, "Yeah, I know. I might as well announce it over the p.a."

I said, "So you're not going home because you started?"

"That's right, I'm not."

"So you didn't?"

"I didn't."

I asked her if she heard about Kennedy, and she said, "Is he dead?" Like she really cared, and I think she did. Her measure of both time and consequence took in more than I ever would. She understood there was more than the minute we were living in. I told her I thought Kennedy was alive. That he was going to be okay. Not sure why I said that. I didn't believe it. "Coke?" I said.

She said, "Kennedy has to be. Where are we going without him?" We were about to the Boulder Highway, driving past the Blue Onion, and could see the car hops hustling to keep up with a high school lunch crowd, seniors cruising through, honking. "Just take me home," she said. She grabbed her cigarettes from my windbreaker pocket, lit one, took one puff and tossed the fag through the open window. She said, "My father will help us if we need it."

"He'll help us?" I said. Knowing exactly what she was saying and giving her a hard time.

"He'll know someone if it comes to that."

"He going to buy us a house? Food? Furniture?"

"Grow up, Jack. You know what I'm talking about. I don't need you being a smartass."

"You want an abortion?"

"If it comes to it."

"Is it that simple for you?"

She said, "I'm looking down the road, Jack."

Karen had had a dream about our baby. In it, her grandmother was sitting on a sofa and looking like the family poodle in rhinestones. There were roses behind her. There was opera music and there was a bearded old coot saying over and over again, *You have no name, you have no godfather, you have no pious jew*. Her nine-year-old brother was sterilizing a pocket knife to do the circumcision. In the end a man who looked like our history teacher held the baby—who was now a girl not a boy—like she was fragile china. He turned her so Karen could see her face and he

said, "From the father the bones, the sinew, the nails, the white part of the eye. From the mother, the skin, the flesh, the hair, the pupil of the eye." He folded back the swaddling clothes. He said, "From the Holy one, breath, soul, vision, hearing, locomotion, wit and grace and intelligence and charm to beat the band."

"Your dream is like a bad movie," I said.

Karen said, "Why? Because the baby becomes a girl?"

"You know what I'm saying."

"No," she said, "I don't know what you're saying." We parked in front of her house. "Our baby has a heart already," Karen said.

"By now? It's too soon. It can't, can it?"

"Arms and legs like nubs," Karen said. "Lungs are forming, already breathing for her."

I said, "Already?"

"Already."

"You don't know this."

"I'm telling the truth. I'm telling you what I read."

"How big is she?" I said.

Karen showed me, our baby the space between her thumb and finger. She said, "Cells are making cells while we sit here."

I asked her to describe our baby—was she pretty? what color were her eyes?—and Karen said, "I'm done talking for now." She asked me not to come in, and I drove to a diner across from Jack's business.

It was located off Main, half way up the block, not far from Fremont Street, a brick and stucco low-slung hut that was once somebody's home. Party-mint green inside and out. There was a red linoleum floor, an L-shaped counter and one row of booths next to windows. What you saw from wherever you sat was a gas station. All the stools were taken, so I ordered and found a booth, the last one, in a corner where you looked across the table at a stucco wall, my back to two thugs who were talking low, but I could hear them. They were out of place in their expensive jackets and fruit-colored shirts. Walking by, I had spotted pointy boots. I picked up that earlier this morning they threw a scab off a roof. Not so high up death was a certainty. Not so low death wasn't a possibility. There was a sheet metal workers' strike going into its second month. It was hurting Jack's business. It was bankrupting the air conditioning guys. It was slowing down construction all over town. From two stories up these goons tossed some poor working stiff overboard, and now they were debating whether or not to send flowers. He hadn't died.

"What we done, it's better," the one whose back was to me was saying. "A couple of months and he's walking again, only he's not walking so adroitly. He's left with a leg he's dragging like a twig. Things have gone from worst to badder for the son of a bitch."

"He's a gimp until the day he croaks."

"He's what you call an object lesson."

"A reminder. Like string around your finger."

"Like a bookmark."

"We autographed the guy."

Thugs doing a skit, all this—their patter, their talk of flowers, the broken bones. Comics, these minor league felons.

Great big dudes, one jostled the backside of my booth getting out, like someone kneeling your chair at the movies. He touched my shoulder and said, "Excuse me, son." He patted his belly and said, "I need to lose a hundred pounds." He gave me a wink and grin like I was his nephew and he had slipped me a hundred bucks for my first hooker.

At work, I made a doughnut run for Marilyn, Jack's secretary, and then I replaced the radiator hoses in the delivery truck. Last trip north to the Nevada Test Site, I pulled over in the middle of the Mojave Desert and duct-taped a leak before it blew. Marilyn asked me to drop a deposit off at the bank, and I drove to the post office to pay for postage for the stamp machine. I delivered a couple of swamp coolers to Reynolds Electric. I screwed up and let one drop from a fork lift. We'd have to write it off. I caught Jack in his doorway once, scrutinizing me but acting like he wasn't, standing as if he was waiting on a phone call. He said, "You must have heard about the President."

"He die?" I said.

"It looks like it. They seem to be afraid to tell us."

I said, "Maybe he'll make it. He's got a lot going for him." Cronkite had already made his announcement by then, of course. The hope was it was a mistake, like when the news gets a baseball score wrong.

"Fingers crossed," Jack said.

I asked how the bid had gone, and he said it was a lot of backslapping and grinning. "Theatrics," he said. "Cockamamie bullshit and muckamucks."

I nodded like I understood. Had to admit I liked Jack when he talked like he was sitting at a bar and he was thirsty. His talking that way told me he could have been someone else. There was another Jack inside him. Like all of us. I said, "Yeah?"

"Like teaching toads the alphabet," he said. He shrugged and said, "You keeping your eyes open?"

I said I was.

Again, he said, "Fingers crossed."

His premonition, that bad thought in his thinking, it had been about me, not about the president of the United States. It wasn't a global thought. It was personal to us, to our family, and it was still operative. There was danger in the jungle.

I found an envelope in my gym locker. From Karen. Her brother did

this for her. He brought me messages. Dropped off gifts. Her sealed notes. She licked only the tip of the envelope flaps. One spot. The equipment manager opened up for him. *I'm not myself*, this note said. *See you tonight? Lots of love.*

Basketball practice itself had a meanness to it, assistant Coach Baker jerking us around. The man single-minded. No. No. No—the extent of his hospitality and his vocabulary. Kettle, our head coach, was out of town. I came off a cut and a screen Jerry Kirkington set for me and nailed a top-of-the-key jumper. Swish. Baker exploded. Yosemite Sam was coming at me. Steamed. That wasn't the shot we ran the play for. A one-armed blind man could have gotten off the shot I swished. A girl. A three-legged dog. Baker hustled me back to where we started, got in position to guard me, fought through the pick, hip-checking our center sideways. I caught the pass, and Baker was in my face. "Put it up," he said. "Put it up." I faked the shot and bounce-passed to Jerry, who had rolled free and down the lane for a lay-up.

Baker retrieved the ball, flipped it at me, and said, "Put it up." I went to, and he banged into me. Left me on my butt, sent the ball flying. "Lay-ups," Baker said. "You run plays to get lay-ups." He was talking like I was two. He said, "We want lay-ups, not players."

We quit half an hour early, out of respect, he said, for the President and the First Lady. Truth was we had a game Saturday night and always did a light practice the day before. I stuck around and shot free throws, popping thirty-five in a row at one point. There was the sound of the ball, its rhythm, its smack. There was that echo you get in an empty gym. My body knew what was required for any kind of shot I wanted to put up, left or right-handed. I felt distance and arc and heft in my elbow, in my fingers, in my legs. I understood what angles the backboard would give me. I could have built you a regulation basketball court, correct down to the inch, and I painted the lines myself.

Jerry, hair still wet, stopped on his way out and said, "Time to shut it down, man."

I nailed a free throw.

He said, "So, you all right?"

I told him I was.

"Karen?" he said.

I put up a shot. He asked me if I wanted to kick around, catch a movie, and I told him Karen and I were going to see Sammy Davis, Jr. "Right," Jerry said. "So the world ain't all that bad. It continues to have its pleasures."

"Just parts of it."

"Baker's a prick," Jerry said. He glanced over his shoulder.

I said, "He's a big one."

"Or he's a big one because he's got a small one."

Old joke.

Jerry said, "Hang in there."

I said, "Will do."

But something was nagging at me. Not Jack's premonition. Not Kennedy. What did I know about Camelot? Or what a goofball and horse's ass LBJ would be? Who knew Nixon was waiting in the wings and what a disease he would devolve into? There was Karen. Sure. Over a month is scary, and I'll admit her dream ticked me off. Where was my family in all of it? We seemed to have no part. Her grandmother? Her little brother? Circumcision? Who were they to us? But even to the side of Jack-my-dad and Jack Kennedy and Karen, there was something truly mean-spirited hauling itself in my direction, like when you wake up in the middle of the night and there's a split second where you think you're blind, but only in one eye. Your heart sticks to your ribs, and you are one breath away from unleashing a howl and clawing through the walls.

I was inside our garage, vacuuming the Impala's back seat, and I left the door up. Claire came out from the kitchen, hugging herself. November, and it wasn't warm, but it wasn't cold. I hadn't showered at school and was in my practice gear, Las Vegas High School shorts and t-shirt. She told me she and Betty were at Vegas Village buying groceries when they heard about Kennedy, and Betty sank to her knees, then almost flopped down completely but Claire caught her by the shoulders. Kept her from banging her head. Claire said, "She sat in the middle of the candy aisle and bawled."

"He's dead," I said. Coming home, I heard so on the radio.

"We didn't even know that when she collapsed," Claire said. She told me she crouched by Betty, then finally sat down and hugged her. Shoppers kept asking if Betty was all right, and Claire would say it was the news of the President. A woman gave them a handkerchief. "The communists," one man said. Another woman said, "All the beauty has gone out of the world." The store manager showed up and sent a bag boy for a glass of water. He wanted to call for an ambulance. Betty couldn't stop crying. She and Claire came in Betty's car, so, after about an hour, Claire drove her back home to Betty's house. Claire called Betty's husband and couldn't locate him. That's when they turned on a TV and learned that Kennedy died. Betty, not a word said, dropped to the floor. Claire was dialing our doctor, and Betty's husband walked in. Betty was sitting in the foyer and Claire couldn't budge her.

"Her husband took care of things?" I said.

Claire said, "Not really."

"What'd he do?" I said.

Claire sniffed and said, "He was cross with her. He chewed her out right in front of me. I thought he was going to pitch me and her through the front door."

I know I looked puzzled.

Claire said, "He told her to stand up. He stood over her like she was a drunk, and he said, 'Stand up. Get up off the floor.'"

I set the vacuum hose on the ground, and I said, "Can I tell you something?" Claire studied me. Didn't say a word. I got the feeling she had had enough, but I told her anyway. I said, "Karen might be pregnant."

Claire was standing next to a range, our old General Electric waiting on a ride to a couple who bought it. She did this dip and dodge with her head. Made a check mark. "From the time we went to San Diego?" she said.

I nodded.

She said, "It's over a month then?"

I said, "Way over. She was due right after."

She said, "Gil and Rhoda been told?" Karen's parents.

"Not yet."

"Does she want to go ahead?"

"I don't think so."

"You?"

I did. Why not? I said to Claire, "She says her dad will know someone if it comes to that."

"So she has told him?"

"I don't think so. She's counting on him coming through for her."

I got rescued from the hole I was digging for myself by Jack's pulling into the driveway. He parked short of the garage, climbed out of the Nova, and removed his tie. "Something wrong?" he said.

Claire said, "The President."

Jack reached into his back seat for his coat, and I fired up the vacuum. Claire would tell him about Karen later. She would wait until I went to pick up Karen, and then Claire would sit down with Jack. These days they were acting like pals, not husband and wife. He would mix her a drink, but not one for himself. He would wish he still smoked, and he would assume this was the trouble he saw coming. Or it was more of the trouble that was getting wider and heavier between the two of them. I wouldn't be there to tell him it wasn't his bad thought, to argue my side of it just being a thing that may or may not happen. At some point, Claire would say, "A baby on its way." I could see the three of us talking it out after I got home, me and Jack and Claire sitting in the breakfast nook, the TV on in another room, probably Johnny Carson. I would tell them about Karen's dream, how the baby was a boy, then a girl. "You got to trust your dreams," Jack would say, and Claire would say, "Twins, a boy *and* a girl. Maybe. Do you think?"

"Anything's possible," Jack would say.

"You take a round stone," I would say, "and you hang it from a string so it's above her belly, where the baby's heart is, if you can. If the stone circles, it's a girl. If it swings back and forth, it's a boy."

Jack would agree. Nod his head. "And, if it's, like your mother said, twins, a boy and a girl—what happens then?" Jack would say.

I won't know. Can't tell him.

Claire would add, "Each girl robs a mother of her beauty, inch by inch, ounce by ounce."

Later that night what did happen was close to what I had guessed, only I didn't know about the round stone then and wouldn't for another ten years. My dad wanted to call Karen's folks, but we talked him into waiting a day or two.

He said, "Why?" and Claire said, "What's two days?"

I said, "Give her a chance to talk to them."

Claire said to Jack, "What are you going to say?"

"We'll talk, is all," Jack said. "We're adults here. This is real. You don't abort a child on a whim because you're thinking about the future. A child is the future."

"Give it time," Claire said.

He said, "It's illegal."

"Jack," Claire said.

Jack said, "They don't want the baby?"

I said, "They don't know about it."

"But she knows them," Jack said. "She knows how they'll take it is what I'm saying."

"Give them some time," Claire said.

What was hanging in the air here was Jack and Claire splitting up, and a baby wasn't part of that picture. They were divorcing so politely it made you sick.

Our table for the dinner show at the Sands was down front next to the stage. Before Sammy Davis, Jr., came out, Karen and I ate, and her father sent a photographer over to take our picture. In it, we were sitting directly across from each other like adults. It was not really black and white, but more a cream and charcoal, and came in a pebbled folder that had slats you fit the photo into. Karen was wearing a butter-yellow dress. White spaghetti straps, and her shoes were white. She was holding a white handbag that snapped at the top. She had pinned her hair so it was off her neck, was coiled and pinwheeled.

At one point she took my hand, and I'm sure she could hear what I was thinking, which was, Would marrying me be so bad? Us having a baby? Me getting work? You going to school here? Sure, Karen was Strip people, and I was a townie, but she would have to admit that the difference wasn't quite *Romeo and Juliet*.

The lights dimmed. There was a piano on stage, not far from us. A man in a powder-blue suit came out and started playing get-ready-for-the-show music. Then Sammy Davis, Jr., slipped through the long red

curtains. No fuss. Like he was a stagehand who had wiring to check before the show started. He was wearing tuxedo pants and a bibbed and ruffled shirt. Stark white. No coat. His string tie hung loose, and his collar was open. He held his trumpet like it was a delivery we had to sign for. His hair, slicked to his head, made him look like he was courting some lady on the sly. Like he was a backdoor man. He shuffled his feet to the piano music, did some hoofing, his shoes brushing the stage, that way drummers can do on their drums. Then Sammy Davis, Jr., stood real still, got sad and skinnier. The piano player quit, and Sammy Davis, Jr., said, "I can't be doing a show tonight for you folks." He put his trumpet to his face and he played taps, and when he finished, he said, "That's for my friend Jack."

Years later I would be in a camera shop on Sahara Avenue, and there would be Sammy Davis, Jr., sitting on top of a stool, the man no bigger than a jockey. He was buying a camera from a pal of mine, who introduced us, and I said, "I saw you at the Sands. You were great."

He said, "Still am, man," and he assembled that grin of his, the Hollywood one that said, *yes, he did take that hairpin into hell but had boarded the bus and was on his way back to the top.*

The Sunday after Kennedy was shot, the *Las Vegas Sun* printed a drawing of the United States on its front page. There was a flag pole dead center in the middle of the country, the American flag at half mast. The caption said, *A Nation Mourns.*

The night Karen and I went to the dinner show, the night of the day Kennedy was shot, the night his friend Sammy Davis, Jr., played taps for him, afterwards we left the Impala parked at the Sands and walked along the Strip, going to Foxy's, past the empty land where the El Rancho Hotel burned. Guest houses were all that was left. Short, dead-end roads circled through the bungalows where stucco buildings sat beside olive trees on the flat hard desert. The story around school was hookers used them. You got laid for twenty bucks and sent to heaven for a fifty. It was cold enough Karen wore my coat. I didn't know who she thought she was, but in my head I was Dean Martin, and me and my doll, we were strolling here. Few minutes ago I finished the last show at the Copa. Sent Frank and Sammy and Joey on their way. You happened to be driving by, cruising the Strip, and you saw Karen on my arm. Maybe she was a starlet. Maybe she was a show girl.

At Foxy's, we ate bagels and sipped coffee, then crossed the street to the Sahara Hotel. We rode the elevator to the top where we stood and looked out over the backside of Las Vegas. I found this spot when I was a kid who explored the city on a bicycle. You couldn't see the Strip from here. We were looking at Sunrise Mountain, the Boulder Highway, Paradise Valley, east. We could see my neighborhood and the Hilton on Paradise Road. It was the only casino out there, that and the Landmark,

which didn't count, which was a bust. Who wanted to sleep in a pie shaped room? Sahara Avenue was busy in the direction of the Strip. I pointed out our neighbor's pool. Had done this a hundred times before. A car was cruising along Santa Rita. It slowed and turned toward a drive-way up from ours. Hesitated. There was a gate the driver had to wait for. This was Mr. King.

What, I was thinking, would be so wrong with our living here? With our boy, our girl, our boy and our girl, both of them growing up to be tall and honest in the saddle?

Our baby had a heart. It had lungs.

Las Vegas wasn't a bad city. It had clean air and wide streets. It was safe.

Two days later, Sunday, I picked my pal Fred up, and we drove to Art's sports store. Fred had a key—worked there weekdays after school—and was going to steal a fishing rod for his dad. It was his old man's birthday. I had my eye on a couple of Spaulding starter sets, three iron, five iron, seven iron, nine iron, and a driver. Thought I could sell them for enough to pay for the clubs I had ordered. Fred nixed the idea. Art wasn't that big a fool. The Impala, trunk open, was parked out back, and—pure luck, this—I saw, on Art's lunch-box of a TV, Jack Ruby gun down Lee Harvey Oswald. I'd gotten a Coke, popped off its cap, and was staring right at the screen when Ruby stepped forward and fired. I couldn't believe what I was an eye-witness to. Thugs. You got a problem, wipe it out.