

Beachtown Blues

– a novel –

By Lance Mason

And Yaweh said unto Cain, "Where is Abel thy brother?"

And Cain said, "I know not: Am I my brother's keeper?"

And Yaweh said, "What hast thou done? The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground."

— Gen. IV, ix-x

Chapter One

Gene and I went way back, before kindergarten, before we could pee standing up. We were so tight you couldn't slide a dime between us, and nothing as unimportant as an idea could have split us up. Or so we thought, back in that summer full of secrets and the trouble they would bring.

Everybody's got secrets, and they were nothing new between me and Gene. Shooting out Christmas lights with a BB gun through the Ranchwagon's window, hiding fireworks from the cops, boosting shit from the hobby store, watching through Danny Blackfell's bedroom window while he jerked off after the high school prom—these were secrets we didn't tell to anyone, especially that last one because you never knew when you might be in the same boat.

A secret is valuable because the two of you are locked inside it, while everyone else is locked out. You're bound together by the private things it hides, things only the two of you know. We go through life with lots of secrets, some big, some small, and Gene and I had so many it hurt, including one big one, a secret far too painful for the rest of the town to know about.

The '39 Chevy, a paint-faded, half-primed two-door on a cholo drop, chugged out farts of exhaust as it slithered toward me over the oil-stained pavement of my brother-in-law's Signal station. Once the hardtop braked to a stop, I could see that the driver, Chuy Muro, was alone. I strolled over to see what he wanted, but when I dipped my head through the open passenger window, Chuy pulled a sawed-off 12-gauge—a mankiller—from under the dash. His voice grated like a rusty machine.

"*Qué pasa, chico?* You seen the Zunigas?"

I felt butterflies in my stomach the size of turkey vultures, but when Chuy laid the shotgun beside him on the seat, I realized pretty quick he wasn't meaning the piece for me, just showing it off, part of his *pachuco* style.

I stepped closer, edging my elbows onto the window frame, trying to show Chuy I wasn't afraid. The trumpets-and-accordion music of a *mariachi* group spilled out of the coupé's radio, and a couple of empty Falstaff cans rocked around on the floor. Smoke rose from a spit-stained, half-burned Pall Mall stuck on Chuy's lip. He had ugly, pockmarked skin, white-picket teeth, and black-marble eyes that looked too smart for his face. He was wearing what we called "chuke threads," tan khakis and a plaid flannel shirt buttoned at the neck and cuffs. Inside, the Chevy had a spicy, damp smell, half Vitalis hair tonic and half moldy upholstery.

"Ain't seen 'em lately," I said in English. My Spanish was weak, as much by choice as ignorance. A lot of the chukes—short for *pachucos*—thought I had the lingo because of Gene. He wasn't the greatest at it, but he slung it around if he was with a couple of them, yakking away in the Spanish, so they thought he was a righteous dude. Though I didn't parade out what little I knew, them respecting my best friend was good for me. We

had some respect for Chuy, too, for who and what he was, but he knew the lay of the land in Richland. This wasn't no United Nations meeting. Still, even if we weren't tight, we were cool, Chuy and me.

As for the chopped-off 12-gauge, it was a blind-ass guess if it was a threat or a benefit to Victor and Freddie Zuniga. Maybe they'd crossed Chuy somehow—to do with money or a woman. Or, more likely, over honor.

It was just on nine o'clock under a low, lemon moon. The gas station squatted a block off the Pacific Coast Highway, at A Street and Fifth, the intersection of life, white or brown, for summer nights in Richland, so Chuy figured I'd have seen the two *hermanos vatos* if they'd been cruising around. His glinting, switchblade eyes turned back to me, still looking for an answer to his question about the Zuniga brothers.

"After I came on," I said, "saw Victor going home from work. But they ain't been around since."

He looked back out through the windshield and studied the world. "Going home, huh?"

"Yep," I said. "Around six, just after."

"Not home now." He wasn't calling me a liar, just getting the facts straight for me. He must have been by their house and Victor wasn't there, and Freddie neither. So things had to be straight between them all because, if Chuy was laying for them to settle some trouble, he wouldn't go to the house. Not then, not in our town. And he wouldn't be tipping his hand to me by flapping his trap about it. Could have been they were all in tight on some kind of action, and the shotgun was just a symbol of mutual strength, of common power.

It *was* a bitchen piece of hardware, lying there under Chuy's hand on the striped serape over the Chevy's front seat. Someone had shortened the nut-brown stock halfway up to the trigger guard, then cut a shorter butt to fit against your hip. It had a full oiled-walnut forearm under old, blued barrels that were cut down way past legal.

It looked now like Jesús "Chuy" Muro had seen and said what he'd come for. "*Amigo, no molesta sobre los Zunigas. 'sta bueno. 'sta luego.*"

"Yeah, later."

Chuy motored out of the lot and onto A Street, low and cool, with "El Tortuga" in pink pin-striping on the flat-black trunk. A blue-and-silver Playboys plaque hung in the back window. The Playboys was a Mexican car club—some of them were real bad-asses, and Chuy's packing a shotgun around didn't make the town any safer.

Alone in the station after Chuy left, I took a long pull on the Dr. Pepper in my hand and felt the bubbles' soury sweetness scouring my throat and gassing out my nose. One of my back teeth zinged from the cold, and I started thinking about life. There were so many decisions in front of me, and I wasn't sure which way to go.

Summer was ending and football practice double-days were starting soon, so I had to decide between some roadwork and playing ball, or bodysurfing and maybe a run down to Mexico for a week. I'd been doing some night work at the station for my sister Elaine's husband since spring to earn some extra bread so Gene and I could maybe get down to Ensenada before school opened. We were lifting weights and we'd heard Tony Yamashita and the Higgins brothers were using pills you could buy in Baja over the counter to bulk up, so we wanted to get some. But Yamashita's uncle was a doctor, and he pulled us aside and told us we shouldn't use the stuff, that it could hurt our livers and

make our nuts shrivel up. I wasn't convinced, and this was way before anybody in the news was talking about steroids and other kinds of juice. I was trying to break my own record on the bench press, football or no football, and figured a couple of weeks of the stuff wouldn't hurt me.

We'd heard other stories, too, of guys scoring with American babes down in Mexico. Back then, though, you couldn't do any better with the chicks than making varsity football, and Gene and I had one more year to get our own lettermen's jackets and get laid before we maybe went off to college or somewhere else. Also, we'd already talked about someday just blowing this stinkhole town. We'd read parts of the book *On The Road*, about these two young beatnik dopers who cross America back and forth by car and make discoveries about life. One of the dopers got famous for writing it.

That's what we wanted to do, break out and find our lives, find the real thing, and these were big decisions, with lots of stuff mixed up together. I couldn't really figure it out on my own, but Gene and I had made a commitment to it, and to each other.

"Hey! Señor Eduardo! What's up?"

A giggle hit my stomach and a little charge, like a tickle, ran off my ears and down my neck. I always got a happy feeling inside and outside when Gene showed up. I smiled at him as he walked across the lot toward me.

"Pumping gas!" Gene called out. "Mr. Ed, you are a *working* man." He was wearing blue Levi's and a white T-shirt under his red windbreaker, and was giving me the hip-rolling, walk-and-talk the splibs used.

That's what the blacks called themselves around us, splibs. I heard it came out of the service, maybe the Marines. Splibs, chukes, patties—everybody had nicknames so you didn't have to talk about color, something you tried to avoid, even back then.

Gene went on. "But you gotta be working on a *wo*-man, Ace. What them Okies be calling 'poontang.'"

I upped the ante on the Hicksville accent. "You're a big-talking dude, You-Genie. Like you done split from Sadie Palm? Found a home for your virgin roscoe?"

Gene faked being mad. "I'll have you know you're talking about six inches of pink iron! The women of this pissant town'll be fighting over it when the word gets out."

"When the word gets out, my ass, Regina." His correct name was Eugene, but I called him Regina, Geno, The Genie, anything. We always screwed around with each other's names, searching for the coolest one or the most insulting. "Before the word can get *out*, you gotta get the sausage *in*."

"It can't be far off, Squirdork. Not far. And when it happens, gas jockey, you'll still be humping your hand."

"*Fuucckk yoouuu*," I told him, which closed out the playacting.

Gene just smiled and gave me that devil-may-care shrug. "So, what's the happs, Big Eddie? Any dollies cruise in tonight?"

"Nah. But Chuy Muro was here. He just left."

"Bad-ass Choochie Jesús," said Gene, using another form of the Mexican nickname. "What's he up to?"

"Looking for the Zunigas," I said, "and he had a sawed-off twelve-gauge with him."

Gene looked for a minute like a little kid, all swelled up eyes and circled mouth and frozen-stiff limbs. Then he sort of shook himself and snorted at me, "Fuck! You bullshit artist. He didn't have no gun."

"Fuck he didn't. He showed it to me, plain as day. Like he wanted me to know he had it. To know he wasn't screwing around."

"And he's looking for the Zuniga brothers? He's after them?"

"Nah, I don't think so. He said he went over to their house to find them, but they wasn't there."

"Then who's he after?" Gene seemed definitely concerned. "Was it loaded?"

"I don't know and I wasn't asking. None of my business or he woulda told me."

"That is fucked up, Hot Rod. He might be looking to kill somebody." Gene was the more righteous of the two of us. We were close, closer than brothers, but he took some things about life more serious than I did.

"Scare 'em, more likely," I said. "Chuy's a bad-ass, but he ain't the killing type."

"Shit you know about it? It ain't your ass he's after."

"No, it's yours, Numb-nuts!" I laughed.

"No joke, man. That's bad shit. He's a Playboy, and they do *not* fuck around."

"That's right, so I ain't calling the cops on him. I aim to stay cool with Chuy. Cool as I can be, anyway, with a chuke."

Gene decided to change the subject to something more important. "So, no pussy through here tonight, huh?"

"Oh, plenty, Geno Reno. But none for you. They like their men tall and studly, Dudley." I had grown four inches since the spring and was now taller than Gene.

"*You?* Studly? You are one dreaming son-of-a-bitch. You should write comic books."

"Oh, get fucked. You know you ain't getting any this century."

"Well, you ain't getting any unless you knock her out first."

Gene and I would go on like this for hours if the mood was right. But my brother-in-law was due back soon. "Want a Coke or something?"

"Nah, I might go cruise town." Gene looked down the street. "Seen anybody else?"

"Nah. So, where's the Ranchwagon?" It was an old Ford we'd bought together.

"Left it at home. Saving the gas for the weekend."

"Good idea," I said. Gas was cheap, but we were cheaper. "You working tomorrow?"

"Hell, yes," he said, "I am a working motherfucker. Making the big coin. Hey"—his mouth and eyes started dancing around—"did you hear about Mandy O'Bryan? She broke up with Turner, I heard."

I groaned. Mandy O'Bryan went to Richland High and was my current dream girl. "You are shitting me?"

"Gwen Tweedy told me. She said she heard it from what's-her-face Clark."

"Anita Clark? She *knows*. She's probably Mandy's best friend in the world."

"Don't get all jacked up, Romeo," Gene snickered. "It's not like she'd give you a shot."

"Eat me, fool," I told him. "She worships the ground I walk on."

"See what happens if Turner finds out you said that."

"Who's gonna tell him? You?"

Gene made a zipper move across his face. "My lips are sealed." Scuffing his shoe on the asphalt, he said, "So, you got the hair to ask her out?"

"*I wish*. There's a hundred guys after her."

"A thousand," said Gene.

"Yeah, a thousand. Did you see her at that party Friday?"

"Of course I saw her. I was standing right next to you, Ace Face." Other guys were "ass face," but we called each other Ace Face.

"What a set, huh?"

"Yeah," he said, "she's really got 'em."

"Turner—that lucky bastard."

"Yeah, no shit." Then Gene wagged his eyebrows at me over a shitty grin. "But *ex-lucky* bastard now," he said, and we both cracked up.

One hand in his front pocket and one hand in the back one, Gene swung his shoulders right and left, surveying the station and the night's summer air. "Well, I'm going to hit the road, Sonny Boy. See you in the a.m."

"Meet you at Topp's for a Coke."

Gene crossed the lot toward Fifth Street, and a salty night breeze came off the ocean a mile away. My brother-in-law would show up soon with some food my sister had made for me. Meanwhile, Roy Orbison sang *Only the Lonely* over the radio back in the station's office, and I watched Gene walking away, feet splayed and shoulders hunched, his turned-up James Dean collar shielding his neck from the wind. He looked like a living ghost of the time, and some part of me wanted to reach out into the dark and pull him back.