Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Galveston

Written by Nick Pizzolatto

Published by Sphere

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

GALVESTON

A Novel



NIC PIZZOLATTO

sphere

SPHERE

First published in the United States in 2010 by Scribner,
a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc
First published in Great Britain in 2014 by Sphere as a paperback original

Copyright © Nic Pizzolatto 2010

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All characters and events in this publication, other
than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious
and any resemblance to real persons,
living or dead, is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any
form or by any means, without the prior
permission in writing of the publisher, nor be
otherwise circulated in any form of binding or
cover other than that in which it is published and
without a similar condition including this
condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-7515-5705-3

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Papers used by Sphere are from well-managed forests
and other responsible sources.



Sphere
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
100 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DY

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.littlebrown.co.uk

For Amy, and for Allegra

How often have I lain beneath rain on a strange roof, thinking of home.

—*William Faulkner*

ONE



A doctor took pictures of my lungs. They were full of snow flurries.

When I walked out the office all the people in the waiting room looked grateful they weren't me. Certain things you can see in a person's face.

I'd felt something was wrong because days before I had chased a guy up two flights of stairs and I'd had trouble breathing, like there was a barbell on my chest. I'd been drinking pretty hard for a couple weeks, but I knew it was more than that. I'd gotten so angry about the sudden pain that I broke the man's hand. He spat teeth and complained to Stan that he thought it was excessive.

But that's why they've always given me work. Because I'm excessive.

I told Stan about the chest pains and he sent me to a doctor who was into him for forty large.

Outside the doctor's office now I took the cigarettes from my jacket and started to crush the pack in my hands, but I decided this was no time to quit. I lit one up there on the sidewalk but it

didn't taste good and the smoke made me think of cotton fibers weaving through my chest. Buses and cars cruised slow and daylight flashed off their glass and chrome. Behind my sunglasses it was kind of like I was at the bottom of the sea and the vehicles were fish. I imagined a much darker, cooler place, and the fish became shadows.

A horn jolted me awake. I'd started to step off the curb. I flagged down a taxi.

I was thinking about Loraine, a girl I'd once dated, and how one night I'd stayed up talking with her till dawn on a beach in Galveston, from a spot where we could watch the plump white exhaust from oil refineries unroll in the distance like a road into the sun. That would have been ten, eleven years ago. She was always too young for me, I guess.

Even before the X-rays I was already foul with anger because the woman I had thought of as my girlfriend, Carmen, had started sleeping with my boss, Stan Ptitko. I was on my way to meet him at his bar. Not much point today. But you don't stop being who you are just because there's a blizzard of soap chips in your chest.

There's no getting out alive, but you hope to avoid a deadline. I wasn't going to tell Stan or Angelo or Lou about my lungs. I didn't want them hanging out at the bar, talking about me when I wasn't there. Laughing.

Fingerprints smudged the cab's window, and uptown approached outside of it. Some places open themselves for you, but there was nothing gatelike about New Orleans. The city was a sunken anvil that sustained its own atmosphere. The sun flared between buildings and oak trees and I felt the light on my face and then the shade, like a strobe. I thought about Carmen's ass,

and the way she smiled at me over her shoulder. I still thought about Carmen, and it didn't make sense because I knew she was a whore and totally heartless. She'd been with Angelo Medeiras when we started up. I guess I took her from him, more or less. Now she was with Stan. Angelo worked for him, too. It cooled my sense of insult to assume she was balling a few guys behind Stan's back.

I was trying to think of who I could tell about my lungs, because I wanted to tell someone. You have to admit that's a bullshit piece of news to get when you've got business to attend.

The bar was called Stan's Place, brick and tin-roofed, with barred windows and a dented metal door.

Lou Theriot, Jay Meires, and a couple people I didn't know sat inside, old guys. The bartender's name was George. His left ear was packed with white gauze. I asked him where Stan was and he nodded toward a set of stairs running up the wall to the office. The door was closed, so I sat on a stool and ordered a beer. Then I remembered that I was dying and changed the order to a Johnnie Walker Blue. Lou and Jay were talking about a problem with one of the bookmaking franchises. I could tell because I'd run book for a few years in my early twenties and knew the language. They stopped talking and looked up at me because I was listening. I didn't smile or anything and they went back to talking, but much softer now, with their heads turned down so I couldn't hear. They never cared much for me. They knew Carmen as a waitress here, before she hooked up with Stan, and I think they had some ill will toward me on her behalf.

They also didn't like me because I never really fit in around this crew. Stan inherited me from his former boss, Sam Gino, who inherited me from Harper Robicheaux, and it's mainly my

fault that I wasn't ever fully accepted by these guys. They kept dago ideas about fashion—tracksuits or shirts with French cuffs, slicked hair—but I wear jeans and black T-shirts with a jacket and cowboy boots, like I always have, and I keep the back of my hair long and I won't shave my beard. My name's Roy Cady, but Gino started everyone calling me Big Country, and they still do, without affection. I'm from East Texas, the Golden Triangle, and these boys have always thought of me as trash, which is fine because they're also scared of me.

It's not like I had any desire to climb the corporational ladder.

I'd always gotten along fine with Angelo, though. Before the stuff with Carmen.

The office door opened then and Carmen stepped out, flattening her skirt and teasing her hair a bit, and right away she saw me and kind of froze. But Stan came out behind her and she walked down the stairs with him following, tucking his shirt at the back. Their footsteps made the stairs groan and Carmen lit a cigarette before she reached the bottom. She took it to the other end of the bar and ordered a greyhound.

I thought of a smart-ass remark to make to her, but I had to keep it to myself.

The main thing I was angry about was that she'd ruined my solitude. I'd been on my own for a long time.

I mean, I got laid when I needed it, but I was alone.

Now it was like alone didn't quite cut it.

Stan nodded to Lou and Jay, and he came to me and said that Angelo and I were going to do a job that night. It took effort for me to appear copacetic with this partnering. Stan had this sloped Polack brow like a cliff and it hung shadows over his tiny eyes.

He gave me a slip of paper and said, "Jefferson Heights. You're visiting Frank Sienkiewicz."

I remembered that name, a president or former president or attorney for the dockworkers' local.

The stevedores were supposedly coming under federal scrutiny, I think, rumored to be a probe target. They moved things for Stan's partners, and the payoffs kept their union alive, but that's really all I knew about it.

Stan said, "Nobody should get hurt bad. I don't want that now." He stood behind my stool, laid a hand on my shoulder. I could never read those small eyes stamped under the outcrop of his brow, but a secret to his success had to be the total lack of mercy in his face—the wide Slavic cheekbones over the tight, lipless mouth of a Cossack raider. If the Soviets really had people who'd run a red-hot coat hanger up inside the shaft of your cock, they were people like Stanislaw Ptitko. He said, "I need the guy to understand the right thing. He needs to play for the team. That's all."

"I need Angelo for that?"

"Take him anyway. Because I'm careful." He also told me that I needed to make a collection in Gretna before meeting Angelo. "So keep on schedule," he added, nodding to the Johnnie Walker in my hand.

Stan downed a shot of Stoli, slid the glass back to the bartender. The gauze around George's ear had a yellow stain at its center. Stan didn't really look at me as he straightened his tie and said, "No gats."

"What?"

"Remember that trucker last year? I don't want anybody getting shot because of someone's bullshit nerves. So I'm telling

you and I'm telling Angelo: leave the guns. Don't let me find out you went in packing."

"The guy gonna be there?"

"He will. I'm sending him a care package."

He walked off and paused beside Carmen, kissed her hard and kneaded her tit once, and a barbaric intention crawled up in my mind. Then he walked out the back door and Carmen just looked bored, smoking. I thought about what Stan had said about not bringing guns.

Which struck me as a strange thing to say.

Carmen scowled at me from the other end of the bar, and Lou and Jay saw it and started talking to her, telling her how *relaxed* Stan seemed when he was with her. That was actually true, I realized, and it all started to tweak a bit and make places deep in the heart of me twinge with shame. I downed the JW and ordered another.

Carmen had light brown hair, long and bundled behind her head, and her pretty face had rough skin now and powder could build up in those little cracks and lines you couldn't see unless you were close to her. She reminded me of the empty glass of a swallowed cocktail, and at the heart of the empty glass was a smashed lime rind on ice.

I think the reason men liked her was because she gave off high levels of carnality. You looked at her and just knew—this one's up for anything. It's sexy, but you can't really stand it.

I knew about things she'd done, things Angelo didn't know about. Multiple-partner stuff. And one time she offered to bring an extra girl in for me, spice things up.

Not exactly my thing. At the time I had a sense of romance I now see was inappropriate.

I think she thrived on betrayal more than sex. Like she had a score to settle.

She claimed I hit her on one occasion, but I didn't believe it. She was a bit of an actress, and drama held more priority for her than the truth.

Though I admit my memory of the night in question is not quite whole.

In the bar then Lou said something to her like, "It's clear you know how to keep a man happy."

Carmen said, "Nobody can say I don't try."

They all laughed and the .380 at the small of my back felt like it was growing hot. It wouldn't have brought me any satisfaction. I was just angry, and I didn't want to die the way the doctor implied I would.

I dropped some bills on the bar and walked out. A couple nights back I'd been fried on tequila and left my truck here, and it was still intact, a big '84 F-150. This was in 1987, and I liked the models better then: squared and stocky, heavy machinery, not toys. I drove across the Pontchartrain Expressway and left the radio off and my thoughts hummed like a bee's wings.

Gretna. On Franklin Street I wondered when the last time I did things would be. Every beat of sunlight that struck the windshield as the trees passed kind of demanded that I appreciate it, but I can't say that I did. I tried to conceive of not existing, but I didn't have the imagination for it.

I felt that same choking and hopeless sense as when I was twelve, thirteen, staring down the long fields of cotton. August mornings with the burlap sack slung over my shoulder, and Mr. Beidle on his horse with the coach's whistle, directing the kids from the group home. The miserable idea of endlessness in the

task. That feeling like You Cannot Win. After a week of picking I first noticed the calluses on my hands when I dropped a fork and realized I couldn't feel anything with my fingertips. I looked at the hard pads on my fingers now, wrapping the steering wheel, and a wave of anger clenched them. A feeling like I'd been cheated. Then I thought of Mary-Anne, my mother. She was weak, a clever woman who willed herself stupid. But there was no need to think on her today.

I found the address Stan had given me, a sinkhole apartment building next to a line of warehouses: pale, graffitied brick, high weeds and crabgrass blending into the vacant lot next door. Clunkers in the parking lot, that air of oil and hot garbage that circles New Orleans.

Number 12. Second floor. Ned Skinner.

I strolled past his window once and glanced inside. It was dark and I didn't register any movement. I slipped a hand in the pocket where I stored my knuckle-dusters and kept on walking across the balcony. I went downstairs, around back, and checked his outside windows. A breeze wavered the high weeds.

I walked back up and knocked on his door. The whole building had a deserted vibe; blinds stayed closed, no noise from TVs or radios. So I waited and looked around and then used my switchblade on the frame around the lock. Cheap wood, splintered easy.

I slipped in and shut the door. A small place with a couple pieces of furniture and trash everywhere, newspapers and a ton of old racing forms, fast-food wrappers, a dial television with a cracked screen. Empty bottles of well-brand vodka stood along the counter. I always did hate a slob.

It smelled bad in there, like sweat and stale breath and human

vinegar. Mildew and dirt singed the bathroom, stiff clothes on the tiles. The bedroom had just a mattress on the floor and thin, yellowed sheets in a tangle. Crumbled racing forms scattered over the carpet like cut flowers.

On the floor by the bed a framed picture lay on its back. I picked it up: a brown-haired woman with a little boy, both cute enough, smiling and bright-eyed. It looked several years old. You could tell by the woman's hairstyle and fashion, and the paper was of thicker stock than you usually saw nowadays, a leathery texture, and it seemed the faces had faded some over time. I carried it into the living room and threw a pizza box off a chair and sat. I looked down at the picture and then at the apartment. I'd lived in places like this.

I studied the smiles in the picture.

Something passed close to me then, a feeling or piece of knowledge, but I couldn't quite get it. A sense of something I'd once known or felt, a memory that wouldn't come into the light. I kept reaching, but I couldn't grasp the thing.

It felt near, though.

The light from the blinds poured across me in old-fashioned prison stripes. I waited for a long time in that chair, but the man never showed. And given what happened later, I'd come to view the time spent waiting for him as a demarcation in each of our lives, his and mine.

A moment when things could have gone one way, before they went another.