MIT OUT SOUND

A NOVEL

By

Rick Lenz

Mit Out Sound
Copyright © 2024 Rick Lenz. All Rights Reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any written, electronic, recording, or photocopying form without written permission of the publisher or author. The exception would be in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles, or reviews and pages, where permission is specifically granted by the publisher or author. Although every precaution has been taken to verify the accuracy of the information contained herein, the publisher and author assume no responsibility for any errors or omissions. No liability is assumed for damages that may result from the use of information contained within.

Chromodroid Press
ISBN: 978-0-9996953-7-1 (Trade Paperback)
ISBN: 978-0-9996953-8-8 (eBook)

Book Interior and E-book Design by Amit Dey (amitdey2528@gmail.com)
Cover Design by Grace Trees

Mit Out Sound was previously published as *Impersonators Anonymous.*
The manuscript has been substantially updated.

Publisher's Cataloging-In-Publication Data

Names: Lenz, Rick, author.

Title: Mit out sound : a novel / by Rick Lenz.

Description: [Los Angeles, California] : Chromodroid Press, [2025]

Identifiers: ISBN: 978-0-9996953-7-1 (trade paperback) | 978-0-9996953-8-8 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Women motion picture producers and directors--Fiction. | Triangles (Interpersonal relations)--Fiction. | Siblings--Fiction. | Celebrity impersonators--Fiction. | Ambition--Fiction. | Betrayal--Fiction. | Family secrets--Fiction. | BISAC: FICTION / Media Tie-In. | FICTION / Literary.

Classification: LCC: PS3612.E557 M56 2025 | DDC: 813/.6--dc23

For Frances, Riley, and Aaron

Also by Rick Lenz

North of Hollywood
The Alexandrite
Hello, Rest of My Life
A Town Called WHY

“Imagination is everything, it is the preview of life's coming attractions.”

— Albert Einstein

Author's Note

Along with the principal characters, movie stars James Dean and John Wayne are also players in this story. The more deeply I researched their histories, the less I understood who they were. I am reasonably sure that anyone who hoped to gain real insight into the psyches and souls of those two icons would need to dig through every little thing that touched on their complex, sometimes tortured histories, and even that might not be enough to make comprehensive portraits of those two men possible.

For that reason, when those "characters" appear in *Mit Out Sound*, it is always as my version of their mythological movie star selves.

I

THE PRODUCER

1961-1973

"*What is it?*" Faye Bennett, wearing a plaid shirt and gabardine slacks, ran from her bedroom to the top of the stairs. *"It sounds like someone shot you out of a cannon."* She stared down at the foyer below.

"Mama!" Emily shouted for the seventh time, each time louder than the one before. "You'll never, *never* guess!" She went back and slammed the front door shut. "Never in a trillion years!" She swooped up her Pekinese, Suki, from the border of the tidy little rock garden that occupied a corner of the foyer.

From amidst a meadow of bone-white stones, Saint Francis, surrounded by plaster sparrows gathered at his feet, kept his focus on his birds and ignored Emily, who was furiously petting Suki. "You know that show we saw last night about the new vice president's wife?"

"Yes?"

Emily squeezed her eyes shut, sucking in a fierce breath. "She's my new teacher!"

"…*Who* is?"

"That *woman*. The one from last night. The lady who's married to the vice president." She glanced down at Saint Francis's flock. "That Lady Bird."

Her mother came down the stairs. "I don't understand, darling. Your new teacher is named Mrs. Johnson?"

"No! She's *named* something else. Mrs. Nichols, I think. But she *is* that vice president's wife from last night." She set Suki back down next to St. Francis and the sparrows. "*You* know, Mrs. Lady Bird."

"You're teacher is Lady Bird Johnson … then who is Mrs. Nichols?"

"They're the *same*," said Emily, running to her mother. "*They're exactly the same*."

Faye Bennett sat on the third from bottom step and put her arms out to her daughter. "No, darling, they're not." She stroked her cheek and took hold of her shoulders, looking her in the eye. "Your new teacher is Mrs. *Nichols*. You learned her name today. Right? … I'm right, yes?"

Emily looked down and in a small voice said, "Yeah."

"Then she *can't* be the vice president's wife, can she?"

Emily collapsed into her mother, burying her head in her stomach. "Why doesn't anybody ever believe me?"

Faye stroked her hair, petting her. "Your father and I believe you, honey. We just don't know what to make of all these … *people* you keep seeing." She felt dampness through her blouse from Emily's tears. "It'll be okay, love. You'll see. We'll get everything straightened out."

Emily had *no* idea what she meant.

• • •

It wasn't until high school that she was given a brain scan. MRI technology was still in its infancy, its earliest use was primarily as a diagnostic technique. Earlier neuropsychological assessments had labeled her a victim of a form of prosopagnosia, a term derived from Classical Greek, literally meaning "face" and "non-knowledge." In the late nineties it would come to be commonly known as "face blindness," after sufferers' inability to recognize the faces of familiar people.

The disorder is still little understood. No one knew the cause of Emily's occurrence of it. There was no evidence it was genetic or that it had been trauma induced. A brain scan demonstrated there

was no sign of a lesion. It was something she would have to learn to live with. Many others had. Famous people who did or would later suffer from the syndrome included actor Brad Pitt, neuroscientist/author Oliver Sacks, zoologist Jane Goodall, playwright Tom Stoppard, Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak, and many more. The argument could be made that if the affliction didn't halt the careers of these and other highly successful people, why should it hold Emily back?

Also, according to all of the diagnosticians she had been sent to, Emily's case was "not seriously debilitating."

Emily disagreed.

She had one atypical symptom: an inability to distinguish ordinary people from those in the public eye, primarily celebrities. The effect of this syndrome was to bring two images of a person together into one, as with the focusing mechanism of a camera. The new, combined picture was of someone she recognized from film or television or wherever, and could often think of by name.

Dr. Aaron Withers, a pricey psychoanalyst to whom she was sent by her father, decreed that Emily's presentation of face blindness was likely aggravated by the fact that she lived in Beverly Hills, California, where the girl was raised and had spent most of her childhood.

If you spend any time in Beverly Hills, in the post office or the local markets, drug stores, parks, movie theatres, and so on, celebrity sightings are an almost daily occurrence. Emily had seen Jack Nicholson, Natalie Wood, Rock Hudson, Lucille Ball, and hundreds more, oftener than she could count, although in the end she wasn't absolutely sure if she was seeing those celebrities, or if it was someone who looked—to her—like whichever celebrity it either was or was not. She saw roughly 2 percent of the people she took the time to focus on, wherever she went, as this or that

well-known personality. Some of them, because of where she lived, actually were the celebrities she thought they were.

Most were not.

• • •

Because her case seemed mild and not always an issue, Dr. Withers showed her his most *benevolent* smile one day and called her *celebrity-challenged*. "Look at the happy side," he said. "Most people with your 'little problem' feel constantly threatened. At least, you're able to recognize some of the strangers you run into."

In the back of her mind, she heard the words "little problem" almost every school day; her classmates could be unkind about it. The good news was that Dr. Withers turned out to be useful. She learned, when goaded, not to take the bait. With Dr. Withers' support, she devised an "off switch" for those confrontations with other kids and teachers that could easily turn into clashes. The danger usually passed.

Meantime, Dr. Withers helped Emily trace the beginnings of her condition back to childhood days when she was home from school, sick, looking at movies with her mother, her beloved Suki wedged between. They would get lost, watching Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Katharine Hepburn, Bob Hope, and the rest. Emily found herself—in a game-playing way at first, she thought—imposing the people from her movie world onto the people in the real one. Mr. Lassiter, her history teacher, became Jimmy Stewart; Ms. Pesetsky, her home economics teacher, was magically transfigured into feisty character actress Thelma Ritter; the mailman was James Cagney, and so on. From the beginning, her ailment had seemed to be incurable. It wasn't with her all the time, but it was like a cunning leprechaun, often escaping from the nighttime of her unconscious into the glaring sunshine of her wakeful mind, gleefully wreaking its mischief.

It was not enough that the logical part of her knew that Lew Ayres, star of the original (1930) *All Quiet on the Western Front*, was too old to be her brother, that her mother had not really been Myrna Loy, matriarch of the family in the Academy Award classic, *The Best Years of Our* Lives, and that she had to have been hallucinating that first day she'd stared at her own father's profile and realized with dismay that she was seeing the usually benevolent, older, Academy Award-winning (*Hud*) actor Melvyn Douglas.

Her father was far too mean to be Melvyn Douglas.

• • •

An additional wrinkle to Emily's problem was that, having lived in the world's major geographical concentration of actual celebrities for most of her life, she developed an all-consuming desire to *make it* in film.

Despite the supporting roles of the music and television businesses in Tinseltown, the movie industry was still the reason Hollywood was Hollywood. If you wanted to truly *be somebody* amongst that gathering of pixies, you did it via the movie industry.

From the beginning, she knew that was not as easy as a lot of old films make it out to be. She couldn't compose music scores, sing, dance, choreograph, write, or design scenery. She had little knowledge of cinematography or film editing. She'd had some success, acting in school and community theatre plays—one local reviewer even called her "radiant"—but she never forgot her high school drama teacher calling her "perky." It was a strong enough message to start her thinking about more commonsense roles in the movie business.

But nothing small. She didn't mind not being in the spotlight—as long as she was able to believe that someday, the world would recognize that she was special and, by the final reel, understand that in fact it loved and cherished her. She realized that along the

way some people might misinterpret her ambitions as delusions of grandeur, and that anyone aware of her "little problem" might look at those ambitions as a desperate attempt to escape it, but she wouldn't let herself worry about what those people thought.

• • •

For a short time, she worked in a studio mailroom, then, for an even briefer period, in the menial, thankless job of on-set Directors Guild of America trainee. She soon dismissed any directorial ambitions, deciding that profession was unsuited to her periodically timid nature, not to mention her face blindness—although, by the time she reached young womanhood, she had begun to develop some limited skill at disguising her condition.

She decided to be a producer.

That wasn't so easy either. She didn't know anybody in *the business* to teach her the ropes or open important doors.

In the beginning, in 1971, after she'd graduated from UCLA (the College of Fine Arts), she found herself a job as a personal assistant to a TV series star of the time, a gorgeous young man who had been an overnight sensation and whose name, by the following season, nobody knew. Emily's star was cancelled along with the beauty's series.

She tried nonunion extra work, bit parts, and even a stint as an assistant casting director. She wanted to become familiar with the film business from as many points of view as possible and, at the same time, demonstrate that she *was* sure of herself—sure enough, at least, to be a movie producer.

As is often the paradoxical case with people who go into show business, she longed for certainty.

II

THE LOST FILM

1

1973

Emily Bennett stumbled onto the legend of *Showdown* while doing a tiny part on an episode of a long-forgotten television series being shot at Fox Ranch in the West San Fernando Valley. She found herself talking to an extra who claimed to have worked in one scene of a fourth major James Dean film, a film that had never been released.

She was more than startled, since to common knowledge there is no such film.

The man, a rosy-faced talker named Miles, said it had been filmed toward the beginning of the last year of Dean's life, 1955—before *Rebel Without a Cause* began production. "It was shot in Arizona. That's where I was living at the time," he said, unsmiling. He never smiled.

Miles morphed into prodigious-nosed character actor Karl Malden in Emily's mind. It occurred to her that no matter how nutty what he had just said was, if she were to tell him who she was seeing him as, he would get that fey look people do when the guy in the next seat on the bus or subway leans in to you, looks you straight in the eye, and tells you he's not wearing underpants.

"Why wasn't this … um … *lost* film ever released?" she asked Miles. She knew she was being put on.

"Because it was never completed. His costar quit."

"Who was his costar?"

He regarded her belligerently. "Consider yourself special," he said. "I've never told this to anyone. It was John Wayne."

"NO! *Noooo*." She giggled. "Come on."

"God's truth."

Emily shook her head reflexively, flicking her long, chestnut brown hair across her face. She scooped it back and tried to repress a grin. "Why don't I know about it? Why doesn't *everybody* know about it? Why isn't it common gossip?" She was ready to leave this extravagant old liar and go watch the shooting just over the hill.

"Because," he said, "some tough-looking guys told us to keep our mouths shut, and it was easy to see they weren't kidding. One of the extras had some Hollywood experience—he was older than I am now. He told me people had gotten in deep doo-doo for opening their mouths in this kind of deal." He pushed his nose to one side, an expression, she assumed, of gangland intimidation.

"So why are you telling me now?"

When he told her he'd been diagnosed with a brain tumor and felt he *had* to tell the story to *somebody*, Emily restrained herself from rolling her eyes and saying, "Sure... *riiight*."

Two months later, another extra told her Miles had died.

• • •

Several months after that, she was working for Richard Boone, the craggy Western star, as a personal assistant. Boone was a devilishly charming man, as well as a masterful actor, who liked whiskey. He and Emily became close friends, a fact that quietly thrilled her. Although he was a roughhewn bear of a man whose tippling, like so many Hollywood "men's men" of that time and earlier, occasionally approached "problem" level, Emily found him only kind, generous, and with her anyway, always a gentleman.

One night, as they were doing some drinking together, Emily asked him if he'd ever heard of a movie called *Showdown*.

Boone blinked and squinted at her with his patented, dangerous *Have Gun—Will Travel* smile. "Where did you hear about that?"

"Never mind. Did you?"

"I saw it," said Boone. "Well, maybe two minutes of it." He took a draw on his Pall Mall, and then, at the bottom of his warm, raspy register, intoned: "What the hell."

This is the story he told her:

• • •

"One morning I got up and found a brand-new Cadillac in my driveway. Duke had bought me a car, to thank me for doing Sam Houston in *The Alamo*—I'd worked for pocket change since he was producing it and footing the bill. Well, hell, I didn't know what to say. I figured I ought to say thanks for a thing like that, so I jumped into that beautiful black Caddy and drove over to the office he kept in Culver City.

"He was kind of embarrassed and so was I, so to help kill that he got out a bottle of sippin' whiskey, which we went through in short order. When we were near the end of it, he said to me, 'I want to show you something I never showed anybody.'

"He took me into a little screening room, set up and started a reel of film, then returned to the front, sat down a seat away from me, and glanced back and forth between me and the screen as I watched.

"A cowboy rode up over the crest of a hill off in the distance, moving toward the camera. Then the angle shifted to include the profile of a boy—a young man—in the foreground, watching the cowboy. The boy reached into his jacket pocket, drew out a bag of chewing tobacco, opened it, tore off a chaw, and put it into his mouth. I started to say something, but Duke said, 'Watch.'

"The cowboy dug a spur into his mount, a big old bay, and galloped toward the camera and the boy, whom I could now make out clearly. I said, '*What is this*?'

"Duke growled. 'A reminder of all my sins.'

"I said, 'When did you do this? And what in great fucking hell were you doing with James Dean?'

" 'It was a long time ago,' he said. 'I did half a damn film with the little prick. It ought to be worth a fortune, but it's not. We had to shut down.' "

• • •

"*Why? Why* did they shut down?"

"Duke wouldn't say. He turned it off. Said he couldn't look at it anymore."

"Did he have more footage?"

"Evidently."

"Where did it come from? How did it get made? Why hasn't anything ever been written about it?"

"There are good reasons. And I'd advise you not to go passing this story around. I shouldn't have told it to you."

Emily frowned at him, her intelligent eyes narrowing. "Why did you?" She reddened. "Did you just make this all up?"

Boone looked at her somberly. "You know me better than that. And I told you about it because you're trustworthy."

This was the moment, she would realize years later, that marked the point from which there was no turning back. The *Showdown* legend had hooked her.

For now, she knew she couldn't make anything of what Boone had told her; after all, she was "trustworthy," which, looked at from the point of view of a "Hollywood girl" with ambitions, can be an awful burden. But it *had* reminded her of her personal plans. Even though it was more than typically manic of her, she had begun to

feel—*some of the time*—like Don Quixote in search of *honor*. She'd be a "trustworthy" Hollywood producer.

About as likely as a kindly hit man.

Also, in the case of her movie industry ambitions, Emily was not at all certain she had the necessary linear relentlessness of character to be one of the Hollywood killers.

"You're too soft for the job."

To further complicate things, her developing self-image was plagued with dualistic messages. Her other voice seemed to enjoy quibbling with her, goading her, repeatedly asking questions she didn't want to think about, let alone answer.

"A film producer has no time to feed and water prisoners."

"I can be tough."

"So can a sponge—until it's soaked up all the tears of the world the way you do. If there were such a thing as a producer's aptitude test, the only question about something like, say, "compassion" would be: are you able to ignore yours?"

"Leave me alone."

Because of her doubts and all the insecurities that accompany most dysfunctional upbringings, and partly because she could see a growing currency in doing things unconventionally, she decided to make what she thought of as a bold move. She determined to approach her career from outside Hollywood, which mainly in those days left New York City.

• • •

1974

The first thing Emily discovered while living and working in Manhattan was that her lifelong "little problem" did not go away. For years, she'd been sure her celebrity face blindness had been mostly a result of being raised in Los Angeles, where it was not at all odd to

run into, for example, Martin Sheen at Sears, looking for a sheet of HardiBacker ceramic tile underlay. Celebrities had been unavoidable in her experience. It was, she understood, at least *part* of the reason she'd moved to New York.

She found plenty of them there too. Unsurprisingly, a good deal of the time she didn't know the difference. Her roommate's father had once come to town, and he hadn't been a plain-faced Iowan as he should have been, but a middle-aged version of Laurence Olivier.

She worked at a series of jobs in Manhattan: secretary at an advertising agency, assistant to a talent agent, reader for a movie production company, assistant editor for a publishing firm, and finally, assistant vice president in charge of acquisitions at Sterling Films, a respected independent production company. She became the youngest executive they'd ever had.

She told herself: "Finally, I'm knocking at the door." She knew she was now on standby for success, and she hoped—although she hadn't quite worked this part out—honor.

During her final six months with them, Sterling released three pictures, all bombs. Her boss (Emily saw him as Walter Brooke, the actor who said, "Just one word … plastics," in *The Graduate*), with whom she'd had a brief, tempestuous fling, and who had been respectful of all of her suggestions until then, suddenly became unresponsive to everything she had to say, even though she'd had nothing to do with choosing the properties that failed. She'd been instrumental in the optioning of two novels during her fourteen months at Sterling, but neither of them had been scheduled for production and Emily was "dropped."

Crushed, she left New York's endless buffet of stimulations, frustrations, triumphs, and disasters, went back to Los Angeles, and moved in with—*please God, temporarily*—her father, Dr. Benjamin Bennett, a Los Angeles internist, and her brother, Ben Jr., "currently unemployed."

It would have to be temporary. Her father had recently been diagnosed with lymphatic cancer. Only the prospect of being able to spend time with her brother made the notion of playing nurse even imaginable.

Ben Jr., six years older than Emily, was an actor who'd recently undergone his second plastic surgery and was reminding her more and more of Lew Ayres in the role of the young, regretful, and alcoholic brother in the 1938 romantic comedy *Holiday*, at whom Katharine Hepburn looks sadly one evening he's gotten blind drunk and says, "Oh, Neddy, you're dying." Emily hoped a little of her outlook—she told herself it was still essentially optimistic—would rub off on Ben. She wanted to do everything possible to save him.

• • •

January 1976

A week after she'd moved back home, convinced all over again there was a short in her brain's electrical wiring, she got a telephone call from Richard Boone, asking her if she'd be available to help him out while he was in Hollywood and Nevada working on what would turn out to be John Wayne's last film, *The Shootist.*

"Yes!" she cried, recoiling from a shotgun blast of adrenalin. She remembered the tiny bungalow she'd rented when she'd first moved out of her father's house. The rental agent had told her the place had "some history," that Lon McCallister (a blandish juvenile leading man who played mostly callow roles in the late 1930s and early '40s) had lived there when he was breaking into the business.

What if she had once rented a house that James Dean had *briefly* lived in, approximately twenty-two years earlier? It was perfect. It would give her an opening gambit to question Wayne about *Showdown*—if she could just find the guts and a moment alone

with him. Certainly it wouldn't be dishonorable to talk to Wayne about it—if he was willing.

"Yes," she said to Boone. "I'll do it!"

It should be inserted here that Emily didn't think she had a problem with celebrities themselves. She felt comfortable with Boone. At first, she thought it was because of his rough, homely face, but realizing that it was also in its way a beautiful face, she decided it had to be something else. Maybe, she thought, it was because with actual celebrities, she knew where she stood. Richard Boone was Richard Boone. John Wayne was John Wayne. She had convinced herself that she was not awestruck by celebrities, just baffled by a world where she didn't know who was one, and who wasn't.

In Richard Boone's case, she felt more at ease with him, celebrity or not, than she had with anyone since her mother. Maybe it was because their affection for her was so consistent and easy.

• • •

Boone had not talked to her about *Showdown* since that first time, three years earlier. She assumed he forgot he'd mentioned it—they had been drinking that night. She knew he wouldn't want her saying anything about it to John Wayne, but this job, working for Boone on *The Shootist,* hooked into the *determined* corner of Emily's psyche, a hidden alcove she was again beginning to explore simultaneous to her unexpected, rekindled belief in the authenticity of the *Showdown* legend. Just talking about it wouldn't be a comment on her trustworthiness.

"*That's how it begins,* said her other self. *"Boone called you trustworthy."*

"*That's how what begins?"*

"*Skewed definitions of truth."*

"A certain amount of pragmatism is necessary if you want to survive."

"Got it. Survival on one side, and on the opposite shore—"

"I'm simply thinking of TALKING *about it to somebody who already* KNOWS *about it. What honor does that violate? I'm not going to wait for the prince to show up with the right sized slipper. I'm going to let myself dance free for a change.*

The truth was, she did have her own kind of relentlessness. She was sure of it. She'd learned it in New York. A young woman doesn't go to Manhattan and survive for two years without a stockpile of desperation, first cousin to relentlessness. She'd been wrong in her earlier judgment of herself. The fact was, that when she was at her strongest, when she really grabbed on to something, she had the dogged persistence of a trial lawyer. At this moment, her pendulum had swung all the way in that direction. She intended to find out what John Wayne would have to say about *Showdown*.

"I can do it. I can do it."

"From your lips to God's ear, honey."

• • •

She hadn't counted on how sick the old man was.

"Duke" had almost no time for off-camera conversation. He would show up just before the director, Don Siegel, said, "Action," and leave as soon as the shot was over. In his trailer, he was unapproachable to her. Emily could never find an appropriate moment to get away from her obligations to Boone and talk to Wayne alone. She was introduced to him briefly, but that was it.

Boone's role in *The Shootist* wrapped, and Wayne disappeared as usual into a limo that waited for him at the edge of the set.

It was late winter. Boone would soon be on his way to his home in Florida and have no more employment for her for the time being. She put out half-hearted feelers for other personal assistant work, but no one responded.

Her self-confidence pendulum swung all the way back to her un-dogged, timid side.

• • •

Benjamin Bennett Sr. couldn't have helped seeing his daughter come into the room, but he didn't look away from Dian Parkinson, the gorgeous young blonde model on *The Price Is Right*. She wore an eye-popping bikini in the Showcase Showdown, fondling a lucky jet ski. A dead man couldn't have looked away.

"Dad?"

Emily picked up the remote lying next to him on the bed and turned the sound off. "Please talk to me. I want to know something. This is going to seem very strange—an odd thing to ask your own father at my age, but this is something I really need to figure out. If I don't ask you now, I'll never be able to.

"I came across something. I know it's silly … I found Ben's old baby book. Here's the … *curious* part: you have an entry under the section about potty training. It's in your handwriting. It says Ben was potty-trained at three months, and that you started the process at five weeks. Do you remember that?"

Her father's eyes flicked toward her, then back to some point in the space between Emily and the television.

"At *five weeks*? she said, "You *know* that's insane. You're a doctor. The thing I need to find out is, did I get the same treatment? Ben won't remember, he's barely conscious." She waited. "Can you answer me, Daddy?"

Her father's mouth tightened. It hit her like knuckles in the ribs.

"Did you make Mama hold him over the potty too? I picture you gripping him under his arms when he was two or three months old, too roughly; his head is lolling off to the side. Little Ben gazes around, tries to make sense out of any of it, then, one

day, he's accidentally successful while you're holding him there—or maybe you just *scared* him shitless."

She gazed out the window at the manicured yard. When she looked back, he was watching her.

He turned away, casually, and closed his eyes.

Dian Parkinson had vanished from the TV screen, replaced by a close-up of a pristine bathroom sink, thanks to Bon Ami cleanser.

Emily sat on the edge of the bed. "The thing is, I know you did the same thing to me when I came along, whenever you got your hands on me." She giggled. "I told you this was strange. But I've *got* to talk to somebody about it. Ben won't listen. It probably wouldn't bother him any more than it does you. I've talked to a couple of 'professionals,' but they just look knowing and nod and utter platitudes."

She got up and moved to the window, glancing down at the Crayola-green lawn. "See, Daddy, I think this might be worth giving some thought to. It's not going to change you, I understand that. And maybe this is mean of me, you being sick and all, but I'd like you to know, just to say it one time, that the spic-and-span way you look at the world isn't—"she giggled again"—well, it isn't the world, is it? It's something else … not sure what. Anyway, my brain's threat detection system, thanks to your sanitized view of life, is incessantly on standby …" She glanced at the heavy wooden beam in the ceiling, directly over his head, reminded that they lived in earthquake country. "I guess what I'm saying is that sometimes I'll look at you or Ben and see something that's in all three of us. I don't know what to call it—sort of an essence of despair. Other times, I'll glance at either one of you and feel a … it's more than just melancholy, more than just a sad aimlessness, because underneath it, there's a sharp flavor of … There's only one right word for it: rage."

Benjamin Bennett Sr. turned his head slightly and looked her directly in the eye. “Is this why you came up to see your father? To vomit this sort of trash on me?”

Emily recalled coming home from school once. Her father told her that her mom was sick. “I’ve taken her to the best people at UCLA,” he’d said. “She has leukemia.”

Emily had asked him if there was a cure. When he told her there wasn’t, she said, “Could all the pills you give her have anything to do with it?”

“What kind of question is that? Not, what can we do for her? How can we make her feel better? How long does she have? But, is Dad responsible?”

“How long does she have?”

He’d stared at her as if willing her into the cornfield. “A year, maybe two. It’s hard to predict with this kind of leukemia.”

“Could it be longer?”

He could have been addressing a medical conference: “The prevailing professional wisdom is that it’s possible.”

“Then why don’t you try to get her off of the drugs? She doesn’t need them.”

“I’ll be the judge of that. She needs them more than ever.”

Now, today, Emily watched him turn away from her. She studied his profile.

It was unmistakably the profile of Melvyn Douglas.

“You think it’s all about you, Daddy, but it’s not. You think you’re the only crazy one in this family, but you’re not.”