

THE
DEATH
AND
LIFE OF

BOBBY  Z

A NOVEL BY

DON WINSLOW

The Death and Life of Bobby Z

a novel by

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters and incidents
are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.
Any resemblance to actual events or people, living or dead,
is entirely coincidental.

*To Jimmy Vines,
the agent who does everything he says he will*

Thank you to Dave Schniepp for sharing his knowledge of the Southern California surfing scene.

**The Death and Life
of Bobby Z**

1.

Here's how Tim Kearney gets to be the legendary Bobby Z.

How Tim Kearney gets to be Bobby Z is that he sharpens a license plate to a razor's edge and draws it across the throat of a humongous Hell's Angel named Stinkdog, making Stinkdog instantly dead and a DEA agent named Tad Gruzsa instantly happy.

"That'll make him a lot easier to persuade," Gruzsa says when he hears about it, meaning Kearney, of course, because Stinkdog is beyond persuasion by that point.

Gruzsa is right. Not only does the murder rap make Tim Kearney a three-time loser, but killing a Hell's Angel also makes him a dead man on any prison yard in California, so "life without possibility of parole" really means "life without possibility of life" once Tim gets back into the general prison population.

Not that Tim wanted to kill Stinkdog. He didn't. It's just that Stinkdog came to him on the yard and told him to join the Aryan Brotherhood "or else," and Tim said "else," and that's when Tim knew that he'd better hone that license plate to a surgical edge.

The California Corrections Department isn't all that thrilled, although a few of its officials admit to mixed feelings over Stinkdog's demise. What pisses them off is that Tim used the supposed tool of his rehabilitation—honest work making license plates—to commit premeditated murder inside the correctional facility at San Quentin.

The Death and Life of Bobby Z

"It wasn't murder," Tim tells his court-appointed public defender. "It was self-defense."

"You walked up to him on the yard, took a sharpened license plate out of your sweatshirt and slashed his throat," the lawyer reminds him. "And you planned it."

"Carefully," Tim agrees. Stinkdog had about ten inches and a hundred and fifty pounds on him. *Used* to, anyway. Lying dead on a gurney he is considerably shorter than Tim. And much slower.

"That makes it murder," the lawyer says.

"Self-defense," Tim insists.

He doesn't expect the young lawyer or the justice system to appreciate the subtle difference between a preemptive strike and premeditated murder. But Stinkdog had given Tim a choice: Join the Aryan Brotherhood or die. Tim didn't want to do either, so his only option was to take preventive action.

"The Israelis do it all the time," Tim says to the lawyer.

"They're a country," the lawyer answers. "You're a career criminal."

It hasn't been much of a career: Three juvenile B&Es, a short stay with the California Youth Authority, a court-suggested stint in the Marines that ends in a dishonorable discharge, a burglary that ends up in Chino and then the beef that Tim's prior PD referred to as "the Beaut."

"This is a beaut," Tim's prior attorney said. "Let me make sure I have this straight, because I want to get it right when I dine out on it for the next three years. Your buddy picks you up at Chino, and *on the way home* you rob a Gas n' Grub."

My buddy, Tim thought. Asshole Wayne LaPerriere.

"*He* robbed the Gas n' Grub," Tim said. "Told me to wait in the car while he just went in for cigarettes."

"He said you had the gun."

"*He* had the gun."

"Yeah, but he cut a deal first," the lawyer said, "so for all practical purposes *you* had the gun."

The trial was a joke. A regular laugh riot. Especially when the Pakistani night clerk testified.

"And what did the defendant say to you when he pulled the gun?" the DA had asked.

"Exactly?"

"Exactly."

"His precise words?"

"Please."

"He said, 'Don't stickin' move, this is a fuck-up.'"

The jury laughed, the judge laughed, even Tim had to admit it was pretty funny. It was so fucking comical that it landed Tim an eight-to-twelve in San Quentin in the proximity of Stinkdog. And a murder beef.

"Can you plead it down?" Tim asks *this* public defender. "Maybe third-degree?"

"Tim, I could plead it down to pissing in a phone booth, and you're still looking at life without parole," the lawyer says. "You're a three-time loser. A monumental career fuck-up."

A lifetime ambition realized, Tim thinks. And I'm only twenty-seven.

That's where Tad Gruzsa comes in.

Tim's reading a Wolverine comic book in solitary one day when the guards take him out, put him in a black van with blacked-out windows, drive him to an underground garage someplace, then take him in an elevator to a room with no windows and handcuff him to a cheap plastic chair.

A blue chair.

Tim is sitting there for about thirty minutes when a squat muscular man with a bullet-shaped head comes in, followed by a tall, thin Hispanic man with bad skin.

At first Tim thinks that the squat man is bald, but his hair is just shaved close to his head. He has cold blue eyes, a bad blue suit and a smirk, and he looks Tim over like a piece of garbage and then says to the other guy, "I think this is the one."

"There's a definite resemblance," the beaner agrees.

That said, the squat guy sits down next to Tim. Smiles, then takes a big cupped right hand and whacks Tim on the ear—hard. Pain is like fucking *unreal*, but Tim, keeling over, manages to keep his ass on

The Death and Life of Bobby Z

the chair. Which is a minor victory, but he knows that a minor victory is about the best he's going to get.

"You're a career fuck-up," Tad Gruzsa says when Tim straightens back up.

"Thank you."

"You're also a dead fucker when you get back to the yard," Gruzsa says. "Isn't he a dead fucker, Jorge?"

"He's a dead fucker," Jorge Escobar echoes with a grin.

"I'm a dead fucker." Tim smiles.

Gruzsa says, "So we're all agreed you're a dead fucker. The question now is, What, if anything, are we going to do about it?"

"I'm not rolling over on anyone," Tim says. Unless it's LaPerriere, then just show me where to sign.

"You killed a guy, Kearney," Gruzsa says.

Tim shrugs. He killed a lot of guys in the Gulf and no one seemed to get too uptight about it.

"We don't want you to roll over on anyone," Gruzsa says. "We want you to be somebody."

"So does my mother," Tim says.

This time Gruzsa hits Tim with his left hand.

To show he's versatile, Tim thinks.

"Just for a little while," Escobar says. "Then you walk away."

"And you keep walking," Gruzsa says.

Tim doesn't know what the fuck they're talking about, but the "keep walking" part sounds interesting.

"What are you guys talking about?" he asks.

Gruzsa tosses a thin manila file folder onto the table.

Tim opens it and sees a picture of a thin-faced, tanned, handsome man with his long black hair pulled sleekly back into a ponytail.

"He kind of looks like me," Tim observes.

"Duh," says Gruzsa.

Gruzsa's fucking with him, but Tim doesn't care. When you're a three-time loser people get to fuck with you and that's just the way it is.

"Try to pay attention, dummy," Gruzsa says. "What you're going to do is you're going to pretend you're a certain person, then you can

split. The world thinks the Angels whacked you on the yard. You get a new identity, the whole works.”

“What ‘certain person’?” Tim asks.

Tim thinks Gruzsa’s eyes sparkle like those of an old con who sees a fresh piece of chicken on the yard.

“Bobby Z,” Gruzsa answers.

“Who’s Bobby Z?” Tim asks.

2.

"You never heard of Bobby Z?" Escobar asks. His jaw's hanging open like he just can't believe what he's hearing.

"See, you're such a moke you never even heard of Bobby Z," Gruzsa says.

Escobar says proudly, "Bobby Z is a *legend*."

They tell him the legend of Bobby Z.

Robert James Zacharias grew up in Laguna Beach, and like most other kids in Laguna Beach he was *very* cool. He had a skateboard, then a boogie board, then a belly board, then a long board, and by the time he was a sophomore at the aptly named Laguna High he was an accomplished surfer and a more accomplished drug merchant.

Bobby Z could *read* the water, read it like it was "See Spot run." He knew if the waves were coming in sets of three or four, knew when they were going to peak, break right or left, A-frame, backwash or tube, and it was that sense of anticipation that made him such a promising young surfer on the circuit as well as a successful entrepreneur.

Bobby Z couldn't even get a driver's license and was already a legend. Part of the legend was that Z had hitchhiked to his first big marijuana buy and *hitchhiked back*, just stood out there on the Pacific Coast Highway with his thumb out and two Nike gym bags stuffed with Maui Wowie at his feet.

"Bobby Z is ice," intones One Way, resident lunatic of Laguna's public beach and self-appointed Homer to Bobby's Ulysses. "One Way" is short for "One-Way Trip," the story being that One Way took a trip on six dots of blotter acid and never really came back. He wanders the streets of Laguna annoying tourists with his endless stream-of-consciousness soliloquies about the legend of Bobby Z.

"Those skinny Russian babes could skate on Bobby Z," One Way might typically pronounce. "He's that cold. Bobby Z is the Antarctica, except no penguins shit on him. He's pristine. Placid. Nothing worries Bobby Z."

The legend continued that Bobby Z converted the profits of those two Nike bags into four more Nike bags, then sixteen, then thirty-two, and by that time he'd given some money to a flunky adult to buy a classic '66 Mustang and drive him around.

Other kids are worried about what college they're going to get into and Z is thinking *fuck college*, because he's already making more than your third-year MBA, and he's just getting started when Washington declares this war on drugs, which is a major boon to Z, because not only does it keep the prices high, it also puts in jail that layer of semipro incompetents who would otherwise be competition.

And Z figures out early, even before he skips his graduation ceremony, *fuck retail*, retail is where you get to lean against your car and spread 'em. Wholesale is where it's at: Supply the supplier who supplies the supplier. Get to that level and become a non-person just managing the orderly flow of the product and the money and never ever put your own ass on the line. Like buy sell, buy sell, and Z is an organizational genius and he has it figured out.

Bobby Z has it figured out.

"Unlike you, dipstick," Gruzsa says to Tim. "You know how Bobby Z spends his high school graduation night? He rents a suite—a *suite*—at the Ritz-Carlton in Laguna Niguel and has his friends over for the whole weekend."

Tim remembers how *he'd* spent graduation night. Not graduating, for one. While most of his classmates were at the prom, Tim and a buddy and two loser girls parked in a Charger up by the recycling center in Thousand Palms with a few six-packs and a low-

The Death and Life of Bobby Z

grade joint. He hadn't even gotten laid—the girl just puked on his lap and passed out.

“Like you're a moke from fucking birth,” Gruzsa adds.

What can I say? Tim thinks. It's true.

Tim grew up—or failed to—in the shithole town of Desert Hot Springs, California, just across Interstate 10 from the resort town of Palm Springs, where the rich people got to live. The people who lived in Desert Hot Springs got to clean toilets in Palm Springs and wash dishes and carry golf bags, and they were mostly Mexicans, except for a few white-trash drunks like Tim Kearney Sr., who on his rare visits home used to beat the shit out of Tim with a belt while pointing to the lights of Palm Springs and hollering, “See that? That's where the money is!”

Tim figured he had that just about right, so by the time he was fourteen he was breaking into those Palm Springs houses where the money was, nailing TV sets, VCRs, cameras, cash and jewelry and tripping off silent alarms.

On his first juvenile B&E, the family judge asked Tim if he had a drinking problem, and Tim, who was not stupid despite being a monumental fuck-up, knew an out when he heard one and worked up a few crocodile tears and said he was afraid that he was an alcoholic. So he got probation and some AA meetings and a pounding from his old man, instead of the CYA and a pounding from his old man.

Tim went to the meetings, and of course the judge was there, smiling on Tim like he was his own fucking son or something, which made the judge a little irritated when Tim appeared before him on his second juvie B&E, which included among the usual TV sets, VCRs, cameras, cash and jewelry, most of the contents of the victim's extensive liquor cabinet.

But the judge rose above his sense of personal betrayal and sent young Tim to a nearby rehab. Tim spent a month in group therapy learning to fall backward into someone's arms and therefore to trust that person, and all about his good and bad character points, and various “life skills.”

The social worker at the rehab asked Tim if he thought he had “low self-esteem,” and Tim was willing to accept the suggestion.

"Why do you think you have low self-esteem?" she asked kindly. Tim answered, "Because I keep breaking into houses . . ."

"I agree."

". . . and getting caught."

So the social worker did more work with Tim.

Tim had almost completed the program when he had a little slip and burgled the rehab's petty cash box and went out and bought some good boo and the social worker asked Tim rhetorically, "Do you know what your real problem is?"

Tim said that he didn't.

"You have a problem with impulse control," she said. "You don't have any."

But this time the judge was *pissed* and mumbled through clenched jaws something about "tough love" and sent Tim to Chino.

Where Tim did his stretch and picked up a lot of useful life skills, and he was out about a month when the glittering lights of Palm Springs winked at him again. He was looking for jewelry this time and was almost out of the house and away with the goods when he tripped on a lawn sprinkler and sprained his ankle and WestTech Security grabbed him.

"Only you," his father said, "could get fucked up by *water on grass* in the middle of a fucking *desert*."

At that point the old man got the belt out, but Tim had learned a lot of useful life skills in Chino, and in a couple of seconds the old man was falling backward and there wasn't anyone there to keep him from hitting the floor.

So Tim got ready to go back to Chino, but he drew a different judge this time.

"What's your story, anyway?" the judge asked Tim.

"The problem is," Tim said, "I have a lack of impulse control."

The judge disagreed: "Your problem is breaking and entering."

"There's no problem breaking and entering," said Tim. "The problem is breaking and *exiting*."

The judge thought that Tim was such a smartass that maybe instead of learning new material at Chino he should become one of the few and the proud instead.

The Death and Life of Bobby Z

"You won't make it through basic," his old man told him. "You're too much of a pussy."

Tim thought the same thing. He had a problem finishing things (high school, rehab, burglaries) and figured the Marines would be the same thing.

It wasn't.

Tim liked the Corps. He even liked basic training.

"It's simple," he told his unbelieving barracks mates. "You do your job and they don't mess with you too much. Unlike real life."

Plus it got him out of Desert Hot Springs. Out of that shithole town and out of the fucking desert. At Camp Pendleton Tim woke up and got to see the ocean every morning, which was very cool, because it made him feel like one of those *cool* Californians who live by the ocean.

So Tim stuck it out. Stuck out his whole enlistment and even re-upped for a second tour. Got his GED, corporal's stripes and an assignment to Desert Warfare School at Twentynine Palms, about fifty miles from his dear old hometown of Desert Hot Springs.

Of course, Tim thought. Right back in the fucking desert, and he thought about going AWOL but then figured what the fuck, it's only one assignment. He figured maybe next tour he gets Hawaii.

Then Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in order to fuck Tim personally, and Tim got shipped to Saudi Arabia, which was like *major* desert.

"I can't believe you were a Marine," Gruzsa says.

"Semper fido," Tim answers.

Of course Gruzsa already knows—Tim knows he knows, shit, his file is sitting right there—all about Tim's career in the Marine Corps.

It's the one thing about Tim that Gruzsa can't figure out because it doesn't fit. Here you got your prototypical skell, a born-to-lose moke who can't pull off a simple B&E, and the guy wins a Navy Cross in the Gulf.

At the battle of Khafji, before the big U.S. buildup. Iraqi armored division comes pouring across the Saudi border at night and Kearney's recon unit is the only thing in the way. Unit is hanging out there all by its lonesome and it gets rolled over.

Corporal Tim Kearney pulls four wounded Marines out from under Iraqi tanks. Citation says he's running around out there in the