

*The Zero*

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*a novel*

# **Jess Walter**

**REGAN**

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FIRST EDITION

*Designed by Kris Tobiasen*

Printed on acid-free paper

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Walter, Jess, 1965–

The Zero : a novel / Jess Walter.—1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-0-06-089865-6 (alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-06-089865-8 (alk. paper)

I. Title.

PS3573.A4722834Z47 2006

813'.54—dc22

2006044346

06 07 08 09 10 RRD 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

PART ONE

# *Days After*



THEY BURST INTO THE SKY, every bird in creation, angry and agitated, awakened by the same primary thought, erupting in a white feathered cloudburst, anxious and graceful, angling in ever-tightening circles toward the ground, drifting close enough to touch, and then close enough to see that it wasn't a flock of birds at all—it was paper. Burning scraps of paper. All the little birds were paper. Fluttering and circling and growing bigger, falling bits and frantic sheets, some smoking, corners scorched, flaring in the open air until there was nothing left but a fine black edge . . . and then gone, a hole and nothing but the faint memory of smoke. Behind the burning flock came a great wail and a moan as seething black unfurled, the world inside out, birds beating against a roiling sky and in that moment everything that wasn't smoke was paper. And it was beautiful.

“Brian? Is everything okay in there?”

Brian Remy's eyes streaked and flaked and finally jimmied open to the floor of his apartment. He was lying on his side, panning across a fuzzy tree line of carpet fiber. From this, the world focused into being one piece at a time: Boots caked in dried mud. Pizza boxes. Newspapers. A glass. And something just out of range . . .

The flecks in his eyes alerted and scattered and his focus adjusted again: sorrow of sorrows, an empty Knob Creek bottle. They were both tipped over on their right sides on the rug, parallel to one another, the whiskey fifth and him. In this together, apparently. He told himself to breathe, and managed a rusty-lunged wheeze. He blinked and the

streaks and floaters ran across his eyes for cover. Outside Remy's apartment, Mrs. Lubach yelled again. "Brian, I heard a bang! Is everything okay?"

Remy had heard no bang himself, although he tended to believe literalists like Mrs. Lubach. Anyway, a bang of some sort would explain the muffled ringing in his ears. And how it hurt to move his head. He strained to raise his chin and saw, to his right, just past the bottle, his handgun, inert and capable of nothing but lying among the crumbs and hairs on his carpet. If he waited long enough, a rubber-gloved hand would pick it up by the butt and drop it in a Ziploc, tagged and bagged—and him too, as long he didn't move, a bigger bag, but the same—thick plastic the last thing he smelled before the last sigh of the reefer truck door.

Mrs. Lubach's voice came muffled from behind the door: "Brian? I'm going to call the police."

"I am the police." His own voice was tinny and small inside his skull; he wasn't sure the words had actually come out of his mouth.

"Brian?"

He sat up on the floor and looked around his studio apartment: collapsed futon, patched plaster walls, paint-sealed windows. He put his hand against the left side of his head. His hair was sticky and matted, as if he'd been lying in syrup. He pulled his hand away. Sure. Blood.

Okay. Coming together now.

He called to the door, louder: "Just a minute, Mrs. Lubach."

Brian Remy stood, queasy and weak, trying once again to find the loose string between cause and effect—long day, drink, sorrow, gunshot, fatigue. Or some other order. Steadied on the stove, he grabbed a dish towel and held its fringed end against his head. He looked back at the table and could see it all laid out before him, like the set of a student play. A kitchen chair was tipped over, and on the small table where he had been sitting, a self-determinate still life: rag, shot glass, gun oil, wire brush, note.

Okay. This was the problem. These gaps in his memory, or perhaps his life, a series of skips—long shredded tears, empty spaces where the explanations for the most basic things used to be. For a moment he tried to puzzle over it all, the way he might have considered a problem on the job. Cleaning oil might indicate an accident, but the note? What lunatic has ever written a note before . . .

Cleaning a gun?

He picked up the note: "Etc . . ."

*Et cetera?*

Well, that was funny. He didn't recall being so funny. And yet there it was, in his own handwriting. Okay. He was getting somewhere. Whatever had happened, *whatever he'd done*, it was funny. Remy stuffed the note in his pocket, then righted the chair and bent over to pick up his nine, wobbled, set the safety, and laid the gun gently on the table.

"Brian?"

"I'm coming." He followed the path to the wall and put his finger in the fresh hole in the brick behind his chair. Then he stepped away from the wall and held the dish towel to his head, braced against a slithering jolt of pain, and when it passed, walked to the door. He opened it a crack on the hallway outside his apartment, Mrs. Lubach's orange face filling the gap between door and jamb.

"Brian? Is everything okay? It's three o'clock in the morning."

"Is it?"

"There are noise ordinances, Brian." Her voice echoed a split second behind the movement of her mouth, like a badly translated movie. "Rules," she continued. "And that *bang*. People work. We have jangly nerves, Brian. If you're not hurt, then it's inconsiderate, all that noise."

"What if I *am* hurt?"

Mrs. Lubach ignored him. "Just *imagine* what we thought that noise could have been." She was small and lean, with short straight



white hair and wide features; her heavy makeup was painted on just a fraction off-center, giving her the look of a hastily painted figurine, or a foosball goalie. Before, she had been an accountant. Now, he thought he remembered, she wasn't sure what she would be. Would people just go back to the same jobs? As if nothing had happened? "For all we know the air might be combustible," she said now.

"I don't think so." Remy shifted the towel against his head.

"Jennifer-in-6A's boyfriend says that we'll all be in trouble when the wind shifts. Do you think that's true, Brian?"

"I don't know." Remy had no idea who Jennifer's boyfriend was, or who Jennifer was for that matter, or who lived in 6A or which way the wind had been blowing before.

"They don't tell us what's in the smoke. Do they tell you, Brian? Have they told you what's in the smoke?"

"No one has told me anything."

"Would you tell me if they had?"

Remy wasn't sure how to answer that.

"I didn't think so." She leaned in and whispered: "Karl in 9F said it's only a matter of time. He says we're wallowing in carcinogens. Soup of our own extinction. Those were his exact words. Matter of time. Soup. He's atheist. Very scientific. Cold." Then she looked over her shoulder. "I have a friend at the hospital. There are birth defects. Pocked gums. People without legs. I don't like to be in crowds, Brian."

Remy felt blood trickle down his neck and pool in the triangle of his collarbone.

Mrs. Lubach craned her neck to see. "Spontaneous bleeding," she said.

"No. I was just cleaning my gun, and . . ." She stared at him as if he knew how to finish the sentence. "*Et cetera*," he said.

But Mrs. Lubach seemed to have lost interest in Remy's head

wound, in the bang that had brought her to his door. "I won't go downtown anymore," she said, "or on the subway, or to any building taller than ten stories. I think we might leave the city."

Remy rearranged the towel against his head. "I'm gonna go clean this up, Mrs. Lubach."

"I was in the shower," she said, as if he'd asked. "I was in the shower and sometimes the water slows to a trickle, and it did, maybe ten seconds before, and then when I got out, the phone rang, and it was my sister and she told me to turn on the TV. She lives in Wilmington. Her power went out at that precise moment." Mrs. Lubach's eyebrow arched. "In *Wilmington*. I don't understand any of it, Brian."

Remy pulled the towel from his head. "I need to go clean this up, Mrs. Lubach."

"When do you think it will get back to normal?"

Normal. The word itself seemed familiar and strange, like a repressed memory. At one time there had been a *normal*. "You know," he said. "I guess I'm not sure."

"Your friend said things will be better when all the paper has been cleaned up."

"My friend?" Remy asked.

"The young man who was here looking for you this morning. The paper guy."

"Paper guy?" Remy asked.

Mrs. Lubach opened her mouth to answer but—

REMY SAT alone in the emergency room, across from a dew-eyed Vietnamese girl holding a washcloth around what seemed to be a burned hand. She was nine or ten years old, and she was wearing footed pajamas. She was staring at Remy. Every few seconds she would close her eyes and sigh. Then she'd open them again, stare at Remy, and

squeeze them shut, as if he were the thing causing her pain. She appeared to be here by herself. Remy looked around, but there was no one else in the ER except a senior volunteer sitting at the check-in desk, reading a hardcover book. After a moment, Remy stood and walked up to the senior volunteer, a shell-eyed man with a dusting of white whiskers on his cheeks. The man refused to look up from his book. Peering over, Remy saw he was hiding a ratty paperback behind the hardcover. At first Remy thought it was a blank book, but then he saw that he was merely at the end of a chapter and there were only a few words on the page: *nothing more hopeless, than this freedom, this waiting, this inviolability. . . .*

Remy waited but the man didn't look up, didn't even turn the page, just sat reading over and over: *nothing more hopeless . . . this waiting . . .*

"Excuse me," Remy said finally. "But that girl—"

"I told you, Mr. Remy, it will just be a minute," the senior volunteer said. "Please sit down. The doctors know all about you." The old guy stared at Remy and refused to break eye contact, until finally he turned the page and Remy read the first line of the next chapter: *"And he tore himself free . . ."*

"But the girl—"

"They are aware," the man said, "of your condition."

Remy tore himself free and returned to his chair. The Vietnamese girl sighed again and then her eyes snapped open and she stared at Remy evenly, as if she were waiting for the answer to some question. Finally, Remy had to look away.

His eyes fell on a small television bolted to a pillar in the center of the waiting room, flickering with cable news. Remy felt a jolt of déjà vu, anticipating each muted image before it appeared, and it occurred to him that the news had become the wallpaper in his mind now, the endless loop playing in his head—banking wings, blooms of flame, white plumes becoming black and then gray, endless gray, geysers of gray,

dust-covered gray stragglers with gray hands covering gray mouths running from gray shore-break, and the birds, white—endless breeds and flocks of memos and menus and correspondence fluttering silently and then disappearing in the ashen darkness. Brian Remy closed his eyes then and saw what he always saw: shreds of tissue, threads of detachment and degeneration, silent fireworks, the lining of his eyes splintering and sparking and flaking into the soup behind his eyes—flashers and floaters that danced like scraps of paper blown into the world.

DAYS AFTER—with everything sun-bleached and ash-covered, with a halo of smoke still hanging over the island—Remy's partner Paul Guterak announced that he'd never been this happy. Paul and Remy were driving one of the new Ford Excursions that FEMA had sent over—"beautiful fuggin' truck," Paul said, white with tinted black, bulletproof windows, bumpers and back window plastered with stars and stripes, a tiny plastic flag fluttering furiously on the antenna. People lined up all along the West, waving signs and flags of their own, crying, holding up pictures and placards: "God Save . . ." and "Help Us Avenge . . ." and "We Won't Break."

Broken—that's how they looked to Remy. Busted up and put back together with pieces missing. They stood on roadblocks and behind barricades on the street, in flag T-shirts and stiff-brimmed ball caps, animated by Paul and Brian's passing like figures on an old Disney ride, grinding and whirring buccaneers from the *Pirates of the Caribbean*. A boy in a long-sleeved rugby jersey waved a yin-yang painted skateboard over his head near a woman holding a Pomeranian to her chest. Two women in jeans and heels, a bearded guy in a wool coat, and hundreds more, great bundles of open faces, until, after a few blocks, Remy could no longer look and he had to turn forward. And still they cheered and

called out, as if desperate to be noticed into life. They cried. Saluted. They yelled for Remy to acknowledge them, but he stared ahead until they blurred together, the picket faces sliding by, the voices blurring together as he tried to place their longing.

"This is what I mean. We're fuggin' famous." Guterak said it the way someone might admit to being alcoholic. Maybe Paul was right, in his way—this was what it was like to be famous, to have people desperately reflected in the glow of your passing.

Paul pulled the truck off West Street before they reached the tunnel and the line of double-parked dinosaurs—the sat-news trucks and flatbeds, the reefer meat trucks. They stopped for coffee at a corner deli with an American flag taped to the corners of the window. There were flowers again, in pots and in window boxes, freshly misted, bleeding dirty water onto ashy sidewalks. That was something, anyway: For a day or two afterward, Remy remembered, there had been no flowers in the shops. At the deli door, an old couple smiled and gave them a thumbs-up. Brian adjusted his ball cap, which was clamped too tightly against the rough stitches he'd gotten in the ER the night before.

"Listen, I ain't sayin' I'm *glad* it happened," said Paul through his teeth. He was built like a bowling pin, wide at the hips and narrow at the shoulders. He spoke out of one side of his mouth, a gambler giving a tip. "Nothin' like that. But you gotta admit, Bri . . ."

"No, I'm not admitting anything, Paul." His head hurt.

"No, see, what I'm sayin' . . ."

"I *know* what you're saying," Remy said, "I just don't want to hear it."

"I ain't a fuggin' moron here, Bri. I know this ain't politically correct. I ain't gonna say this to anyone else. But come on . . . for you and me . . . I mean . . . we're alive, man. How can we help feeling—"

"I don't want to think about it, Paul. I don't want to talk about how you feel."

"No, you're not understanding me." Paul rubbed his neck.

They lined up for coffee, but the people on line parted and let them move to the front. As they passed, a woman in fur came to life and reached out to pat them on the shoulders of the new Starter jackets the bosses had gotten for everyone. Remy reached for some gum, but his hand went left a few degrees and he bashed his knuckles into a box of Snickers. No one seemed to notice.

When Paul tried to pay, the coffee guy waved them off. "Heroes drink free," he said, and the people on line applauded and Paul tipped the guy three bucks.

"Thank you, sir," Paul said, and he swallowed that thing that kept trying to choke him up.

"God bless!" said an older woman pushing a dog in a baby stroller.

"Thank you, ma'am," Paul said. "God bless *you*."

The dog stared at Remy, who finally had to look away.

Back on the sidewalk, Remy looked over his shoulder to see if people were still moving in the deli, but the sky's reflection glinted off the glass doors and he couldn't see inside. Clouds coming. Jesus, what would the rain do to the dust and ash? And the paper, the snow banks of résumés and memos and reports and bills of lading—what would rain do to all the paper? He knew there must be meetings taking place right now, officials preparing for just that possibility: that the vast paper recovery efforts would be complicated by rainfall. Paul and Remy climbed back in the truck. "That's exactly what I'm talkin' about, what happened in there just now," Paul said. "You can't tell me that ain't the best feeling, them people treating us so good like that. That's all I'm saying, Bri. That's all."

Remy closed his eyes.

"See," Paul pressed on, "before, no one said shit to us, except to gripe about a summons they just got or bark about why we didn't catch the mutt who broke into their fuggin' car, you know? Now . . . free coffee? Pats on the back? I know you been off the street for a while, but Jesus, don't it seem kinda . . . nice?"

Remy hid behind his coffee.

Paul whipped the Excursion back into traffic. "I mean, the overtime. And the shit we get to do. Taking the Yankees on a tour a The Zero. The fuggin' *Yankees*. Look at what we were doin' before this. Picking up The Boss's dry cleaning, runnin' his girlfriends around the city. Sitting through meetings with morons. You can't tell me you'd rather be doing that. And it ain't just that . . . it ain't just relief. It's something else, maybe even something . . ." He leaned over, and for a moment Remy thought he looked completely insane. ". . . something *bad*. You know?"

Remy stared out the window, down a deep canyon of dusted glass and granite, at palettes of bottled water stacked along the street and crates of donated gloves and granola bars. And then the rows of news trucks, two dozen of them queued up for slow troll, grief fishing, block after block—Action and Eyewitness and First At, dishes scooped to the sky like palms at a mass, and beyond them flatbeds burdened with twisted I beams, and then, backing up traffic, the line of expectant refrigerated meat trucks and the black TM truck, the temporary morgue where Remy had taken—

"See, what I'm sayin' . . ." Paul wrestled with his words.

"I know . . . what you're saying," Remy said quietly. "And maybe you're right. But there are things we can't say now. Okay? You can't *say* you've never been this happy. Even if you think it, you can't say it. Everything is . . . there are things . . . we have to leave alone. We have to let 'em sit there, and don't say anything about 'em."

"Like the scalp."

Remy rubbed his mouth and remembered it. Second day at The Zero, he'd found a section of a woman's scalp—gray and stiff—in the debris. He hadn't known what to do, so he put it in a bucket. They searched all afternoon near where it was found, but there were no other body parts, just a six-inch piece of a forehead and singed hairline. An

EMT and an evidence tech debated for ten minutes what to do with the scalp, before they finally took it out of the bucket and put it in one of the slick body bags. Remy carried it to a reefer truck, where it sat like a frog in a sleeping bag, a slick black bump on the empty floor. At least five times a day, Paul brought up the scalp. Whose scalp did Remy think it was? Where did he think the rest of the head was? Would they simply bury the scalp? Finally, Remy said he didn't want to talk about it anymore—didn't want to talk about what a piece of someone's head felt like, how light it was, how stiff and lonesome and worthless, or about how many more slick bags and meat trucks there were than they needed, how the forces at work in this thing didn't leave big enough pieces for body bags.

"See," Paul continued, "you ain't hearing me right, Bri."

"I'm hearing you."

Paul drove to the checkpoint, where two nervous-looking National Guardsmen in sunglasses and down-turned M-16s flanked a short foot cop, who stepped forward and leaned a boot on the running board of the Excursion. Paul reached into his shirt and came up with his ID tags. He held them out for the cop to read.

"Hey, boss," the street cop said, breaking it into two syllables: *bu-oss*. "How's it goin'?"

"Goddamn tough duty, you know?"

"Fuckin' raghead motherfuckers."

"Yeah. That's right. That's right."

Paul put his hand out. Remy removed the tags from his neck and put them in Paul's hand. Paul showed Remy's tags to the street cop, who wrote something down and then gave the tags back to Paul, who handed them back to Remy.

The street cop patted the Excursion's hood. "Nice truck, though."

"Freddies gave it."

The foot cop jerked his head toward the two guardsmen. "All they



gib' me was these two stupid fuckers. And I know one of these Gomers is gonna shoot me in my leg before this is over."

"Maybe they got rubber bullets."

"In a perfect world, huh? Hey, you gib'm hell in there, boss," the cop said. He patted the hood of the Excursion again and stepped back, waving them through.

Remy watched the street cop, watched with a certain wonder the way that word, *boss*, was tossed between the two men, connoting everything of value, the firm scaffolding of reverent loyalty that promised each guy below the chance to rise to heights: his own crew, driver, office, parties, and budgetary discretion and security details, a shot at being boss someday himself. Wasn't this the ladder Remy had patiently climbed *before*? But now . . . what? Remy vaguely remembered thinking it was a corrupting and cruel system, but he had to admit . . . it lived for days like these.

Guterak drove through the checkpoint, to a cascade of applause and waving flags. He chirped the siren, then touched two fingers to his forehead and pointed. "Wish I could do something for these people," he muttered. "Anything. Mow their lawns." Remy leaned back in his seat and tried to breathe through his mouth. The smell never left him now. It lived in the lining of his nose and the fibers of his lungs—his whole body seemed to smell, as if the odor were working through his pores, the fine gray dust: pungent, flour of the dead. Remy was surprised at the air's ferocity down here, acrid with concrete dust and the loosed molecules of burned . . . burned everything. It was amazing what could burn. We forgot that, Remy thought, in our fear of fission and fusion, radiation, infection, concussion and fragmentation. We forgot fire.

"You see Durgan's kid on TV?"

*Please be quiet.*

"Big. I hadn't seen his kid since we all played softball. That's what