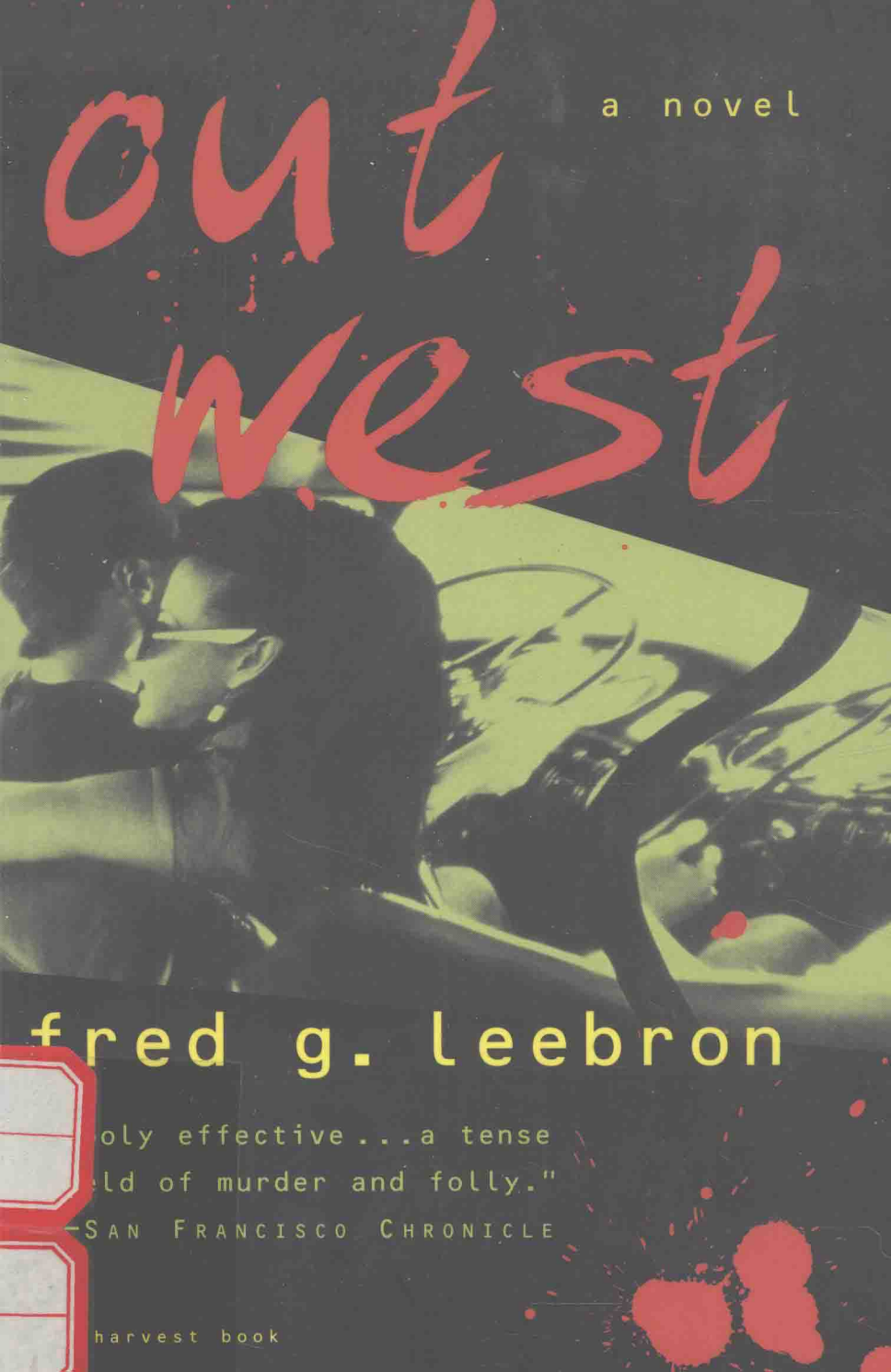


out west



a novel

fred g. leebron

...oly effective...a tense
...ld of murder and folly."

-SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

harvest book

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A HARVEST BOOK
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. . . it is a test,
this riding out the dying of the West.

—ROBERT HASS

for kathryn and cade

o u t w e s t

love lock

love lock

The billboards into Lovelock, Nevada, promised dinner and drink coupons, a roll of quarters, hot showers, cable television, king-sized beds, breakfast coupons, twenty-four hour free coffee, air conditioning, and a swimming pool all for only \$39.99, and Benjamin West, after three nights dozing in rest stops by the side of the interstate, could not help but be swayed. Lovelock came up on the lefthand side in the middle of the Nevada flats, a one-street town with a skyline of gas stations, hotel-motel-casinos, fast-food restaurants, auto dealers, insurance brokers, a combined elementary-junior high-high school, a chamber of commerce. West took the Chevy down main street, keeping his eye out for a name from one of the highway advertisements. The Lickety Split, the Bellwether, It's Your Night, On the House, Holiday Inn, Motel 6—their signs lighting up in the dusk like struck pinball targets. West pulled into

the lot of Lucky Andy's Roadside Hotel-Motel-Casino, the one with the \$5 in quarters and \$20 worth of coupons. He had \$111 left.

In the refrigerated lobby a slot machine stood to either side of the registration desk. West peeled off two \$20 bills and lay them before a woman with tall blond hair and platinum painted fingernails. "Will that do?" he said.

"Sure will." She smiled at him. "Do you want an upper rack or a lower rack?"

He looked at her in numb confusion.

"First floor or second floor," she said.

"Second."

She gave him a key, a roll of quarters, and a wad of coupons, her fingertips grazing his knuckles. He glanced at her quickly, but she was already occupied with something else.

He walked stiff-legged back out to the car, as if he'd been riding a horse for the last four days. Over the course of the past twenty-seven hundred miles he'd given up stopping regularly, and drove until he couldn't take the pain and the cramping and the stiffness anymore. When he slept at the rest stops, he folded himself into the front seat, worried that one of the unsavory types who populated these urine-soaked places all night would try to steal the car out from under him. He was a tired motherfucker, and he found himself adopting the personality he suspected of every state he passed through. In Iowa he had been bland and unassuming, slumped low in the car as he drove, an old man. But by North Platte, Nebraska, where the roar of motorcycles cut into his sleep, he'd begun to swagger and curse, and bought a six-pack for a last two-hour dash down the interstate before sleep overcame him again. When he dipped into the tip of Colorado, he felt

unaccountably swank, wealthy, and he tucked in his shirt and nodded gravely at gas station attendants, touched two fingers to his forehead even though there was no hat there. Now Nevada, warehouses and casinos alongside McDonald's and Motel 6.

West sauntered over to the car, reveling in the not small accomplishment of traversing the bulk of the country without a driver's license. From the trunk he pulled out a set of clean clothes, and hobbled up the fire-escape-style stairway to his second-floor room.

In the airless mush of humidity and disinfectant he undressed and got in the shower. After four days without a shower, he was so ripe with odor that it seemed to line him like a second skin, the smell of Iowa corn and pigsties, Nebraska wheat and truck exhaust, Wyoming slag, Utah salt. When he'd driven across the Great Salt Lake, he'd pulled over, gotten out, and taken a few steps toward the hills shimmering like quartz in the heat. He felt as if he were walking on the moon, the thick bed of shifting, sucking salt suspending rules of gravity and air. He could barely breathe. He got back in the car and gingerly got through Utah, the road lined with scallops of tires burst open and shredded by heat and traffic.

Now in the shower he held his mouth up to the gush of water and rinsed his teeth first, the four-day grit of fast-food hamburgers and funny sandwiches snatched from the glass coolers of gas station convenience stores, the thick sugary film of two dozen caffeine soft drinks, the occasional chocolate bar for energy and digestion, the odd six-pack of beer drunk on the sly over the last bit of midnight road before fatigue closed in and shut him down at desolate rest stops in Iowa City, Ogallala, Rock Springs. He enjoyed the taste of the water, a chemical pureness of chlorine and

fluoride and Nevada minerals, as if it were some post-nuclear solution that could cleanse him of the smell of the country and the car and the interstate.

He changed into the fresh clothes and descended the metal staircase, each step pinging under his tired weight, to the parking lot, packed with RVs, station wagons, minivans, economy cars. He passed the outside of the casino again, not at all curious. West had been eighteen when Atlantic City had opened up its massive hotels to gambling, and at first he'd been hooked, driving out every weekend during his senior year in high school with slick-talking friends who convinced him that he only had to *know* he could win, and then he *would* win. After losing five hundred dollars over six consecutive weekends, he recognized the myth of it. Now he fingered the roll of quarters in his pocket, counting up how many drinks it would buy.

He ate dinner at the restaurant, a curtain-draped wood-paneled spectacle done up as a Spanish galleon, then crossed through the lobby to the casino, feeling woozy from the oversized T-bone and pitcher of Bud. He sat at the horseshoe-shaped bar and ordered a bourbon on the rocks. An inlaid video poker game stared up at him. EASY MONEY! EASY MONEY! He moved down a seat. At the slot machines fifty- and sixty-year-old ladies in blue jeans and neckerchiefs loaded coins in five at a time, accompanied by the whoops of yet older men in cowboy hats and Levi's.

He sipped at his drink. Two seventy-five. He had to go slow. His clean clothes made him sleepy. Twenty-seven hundred miles and he was not even in San Francisco yet. He just wanted to be there. When he'd finally gotten a hold of Bob Fields, he'd felt reassured. "You just take as much time as you need," Bob had said. "The job's waiting for you, it isn't going anywhere. Seven days, eight days. I'd say nine maximum. Can you make it in

nine?" West had counted his money. "Would it be a problem if I got there a little ahead of schedule?" "No problem at all," Bob said. "We're on a day-to-day contract with the security company."

The job paid room, board, and benefits, plus five hundred dollars a month—a pretty good deal. It would give him a chance to put some distance between himself and prison, to figure out what the next step was. He missed the kids at the Institute, but they wouldn't hire him back now. He still had nightmares about Nathan, who had to wear a hockey helmet even when he slept. And the ululations of Melissa, funky-limbed, strapped in her wheelchair, chortling to herself like a bird gurgling water. In his ten years he had not worked with more than twenty children. You got them for a year at a time, possibly longer, until they were shipped to the next research facility or their parents removed them to home for a spell. He never wanted to have kids.

He held up his empty glass and waited to catch the bartender's eye. He was not so drunk as he thought he should be. Perhaps Lucky Andy's watered their drinks. What had intoxicated West most about the Atlantic City casinos was that, when he was gambling, they gave him drinks *free*. But that had not helped him in the quixotic struggle to convince himself that he would win. Now he saw that he had lost five hundred dollars not because the theory was wrong, but because he had failed, ultimately, in *knowing*. He looked at the video poker game and reached into his pocket for the quarters.

"Hey, buddy."

The damn thing apparently talked. He glared at it.

"Hey, buddy. Over here." Someone was knocking on his shoulder as if it were a door. "On your right."

West swirled the bar stool around. His interlocutor, his res-

cuer, was a man of thirty-odd years and six and a half feet, a white cowboy hat cocked on his head like a second grin, a strong jaw, five o'clock face. An open-lipped toothy smile, waiting for the go-ahead to continue talking. West was delighted to discover that he was drunk, after all, and at the back of his mind he was frightened by it, too, he could feel it coming on like a train through a tunnel, and there would be nothing he could do but get up after it had run him over. He wondered if he would have to throw up.

"What," he said uneasily.

The smile drew shut in a line of gratitude, at having been recognized by the chair. The chair nodded for him to go on.

"I've got my hands full, buddy, if you know what I mean," the smile said. "Two ladies." The hat wagged in a direction West could not follow. "I was wondering if you might help me out." He clapped West on the shoulder. "How about it?"

West looked at him. It was some kind of scam, belied by the easy smile, the white teeth, the glad face.

"What the hell," West said. He slouched off the barstool. "Where are they?"

The smile steered him around the curve of the bar. "Name's Jack," he said.

"Scott," West lied, his favorite of fake names.

"Well, Scott, by the end of the night you'll be thanking me. I just know it."

They pulled up at the far end of the bar, underneath a cold shaft of air conditioning, where two women in their twenties sat stirring their drinks. One of the women looked up. She had long dirty-blond hair waved around a thin face. A smirk spread, which she did not attempt to hide. West had to admit that she was beautiful. "You found somebody," she said.

"This is Scott," Jack said.

"I'm Lisa." The woman frowned at West and gave a sideways nod of her head. "This is my sister Ana. Don't fuck with her."

Ana looked up at West frankly, with incautious eyes. Her short brown hair was parted incidentally in the middle, and faint freckles rose with a blush in her face. "Be nice," she said to Lisa. She took West's hand and shook it. Her wrist seemed as thin as his thumb. "I'm pleased to meet you," she said.

"He's a jerk," Lisa said. She jabbed West in the shoulder with her index finger. "I'll repeat myself. Don't fuck with her."

"I'm out of here," West said. He turned to go. Somebody caught his arm and he assumed it was Jack, but when he looked down it was Ana.

Jack laughed. "Okay, babe. I did my end." He offered the crook of his elbow to Lisa, and she took it and rose off the stool. She was wearing a tank top and very tight jeans, and she undulated as she arranged herself next to Jack.

"You two be good." She smiled fakely at the both of them, while Jack began to lead her away. "Honestly," she said. "I don't care what you do."

West watched them go, two tapered backs. Ana still held on to him, and he could not bring himself to move. He shut his eyes and then opened them, expecting to find himself staring down at the video poker game. She let go and patted the empty seat beside her.

"Join me," she said.

Obediently he sat on the stool.

She touched his hair lightly. "I like your hair," she said. "It's clean." He tensed, liking her touch, wanting her to go further. She selected a lock and stretched it unpainfully between two fingers. "Don't you worry about Lisa. She's my younger sister but I frustrate her terribly." She said it in an even way, without irony.

"The way she was"—West felt for each word—"I thought she was older."

"It's because I'm a little slow," Ana said. She let go of the hair and turned his head to face her. "Mildly retarded. Would you mind kissing someone like me?"

"No," West said, a weird joke, but he'd play along. "I wouldn't."

She pulled his head to her and kissed him, long and tight-lipped, as if she had learned by watching television, her face moving instead of her mouth. It was still a nice kiss. He drew back.

"Did you like it?" she said. Her finger traced his face.

"Sure." West glanced around the casino to see if anyone had noticed that her head as she kissed had slowly ticked back and forth like a metronome, that the sweet pout of her lips was infantile. He rubbed the back of his neck. He liked her bangs and how small her nose was. He felt as if the back of his head had been shot off and all the air was rushing in. He reached for the back of his head. He wondered if this were the train of his drunk finally coming, to knock him out.

"Can I buy you a drink?" she said. "I have ten dollars." She took out a plastic purse from a little red pocketbook and showed him the money. She handed him a personal identification card that said TENNESSEE in a hologram across her face. She pointed at the birthdate. "I'm twenty-five," she said. "See." Effortlessly she flagged down the bartender. "What are you drinking?"

West shook his head and swallowed to see how close the drink was to overpowering him. It was not close enough. "Bourbon," he said hoarsely.

"Bourbon," she said. The bartender nodded and went off to make the drink. "Bourbon," she said again, drawing out the *r*.