

Timbuktu

By Paul Auster (1999)

CHAPTER ONE

Mr. Bones knew that Willy wasn't long for this world. The cough had been inside him for over six months, and by now there wasn't a chance in hell that he would ever get rid of it. Slowly and inexorably, without once taking a turn for the better, the thing had assumed a life of its own, advancing from a faint, phlegm-filled rattle in the lungs on February third to the wheezy sputum-jigs and gobby convulsions of high summer. All that was bad enough, but in the past two weeks a new tonality had crept into the bronchial music—something tight and flinty and percussive—and the attacks came so often now as to be almost constant. Every time one of them started, Mr. Bones half expected Willy's body to explode from the rockets of pressure bursting against his rib cage. He figured that blood would be the next step, and when that fatal moment finally occurred on Saturday afternoon, it was as if all the angels in heaven had opened their mouths and started to sing. Mr. Bones saw it happen with his own eyes, standing by the edge of the road between Washington and Baltimore as Willy hawked up a few miserable clots of red matter into his handkerchief, and right then and there he knew that every ounce of hope was gone. The smell of death had settled upon Willy G. Christmas, and as surely as the sun was a lamp in the clouds that went off and on every day, the end was drawing near.

What was a poor dog to do? Mr. Bones had been with Willy since his earliest days as a pup, and by now it was next to impossible for him to imagine a world that did not have his master in it. Every thought, every memory, every particle of the earth and air was saturated with Willy's presence. Habits die hard, and no doubt there's some truth to the adage about old dogs and new tricks, but it was more than just love or devotion that caused Mr. Bones to dread what was coming. It was pure ontological terror. Subtract Willy from the world, and the odds were that the world itself would cease to exist.

Such was the quandary Mr. Bones faced that August morning as he shuffled through the streets of Baltimore with his ailing master. A dog alone was no better than a dead dog, and once Willy breathed his

50 last, he'd have nothing to look forward to but his own imminent demise. Willy had been cautioning him about this for many days now, and Mr. Bones knew the drill by heart: how to avoid the dogcatchers and constables, the paddy wagons and unmarked cars, the hypocrites from the so-called humane societies. No matter how sweetly they talked to you, the word shelter meant trouble. It would begin with nets and tranquilizer guns, devolve into a nightmare of cages and fluorescent lights, and end with a lethal injection or a dose of poison gas. If Mr. Bones had belonged to some recognizable breed, he might have stood a chance in the daily beauty contests for prospective owners, but Willy's sidekick was a hodgepodge of genetic strains—part collie, part Labrador, part spaniel, part canine puzzle—and to make matters worse, there were burrs protruding from his ragged coat, bad smells emanating from his mouth, and a perpetual bloodshot sadness lurking in his eyes. No one was going to want to rescue him. As the homeless bard was fond of putting it, the outcome was written in stone. Unless Mr. Bones found another master in one quick hurry, he was a pooch primed for oblivion.

75 [...] Mr. Bones understood. He always understood what Willy said to him. This had been the case for as long as he could remember, and by now his grasp of Ingloosh was as good as any other immigrant who had spent seven years on American soil. It was his second language, of course, and quite different from the one his mother had taught him, but even though his pronunciation left something to be desired, he had thoroughly mastered the ins and outs of its syntax and grammar. None of this should be seen as strange or unusual for an animal of Mr. Bones's intelligence. Most dogs acquire a good working knowledge of two-legged speech, but in Mr. Bones's case there was the advantage of being blessed with a master who did not treat him as an inferior. They had been boon companions from the start, and when you added in the fact that Mr. Bones was not just Willy's best friend but his only friend, and then further considered that Willy was a man in love with the sound of his own voice, a genuine, dyed-in-the-wool logomaniac who scarcely stopped talking from the instant he opened his eyes in the morning until he passed out drunk at night, it made perfect sense that Mr. Bones should have felt so at home in the native lingo. When all was said and done, the only surprise was that he hadn't learned to talk better himself. It wasn't for lack of earnest effort, but biology was against him, and what with the configuration of muzzle, teeth, and

105 tongue that fate had saddled him with, the best he
could do was emit a series of yaps and yawns and
yowls, a mooning, muddled sort of discourse. He
was painfully aware of how far from fluency these
noises fell, but Willy always let him have his say,
110 and in the end that was all that mattered. Mr.
Bones was free to put in his two cents, and
whenever he did so his master would give him his
full attention, and to look at Willy's face as he
watched his friend struggle to make like a member
115 of the human tribe, you would have sworn that he
was hanging on every word.

That gloomy Sunday in Baltimore, however, Mr.
Bones kept his mouth shut. They were down to their
120 last days together, perhaps even their last hours,
and this was no time to indulge in long speeches
and loopy contortions, no time for the old
shenanigans. Certain situations called for tact and
discipline, and in their present dire straits it would
125 be far better to hold his tongue and behave like a
good, loyal dog. He let Willy snap the leash onto his
collar without protest. He didn't whine about not
having eaten in the past thirty-six hours; he didn't
sniff the air for female scents; he didn't stop to pee
130 on every lamppost and fire hydrant. He simply
ambled along beside Willy, following his master as
they searched the empty avenues for 316 Calvert
Street.

135 Mr. Bones had nothing against Baltimore per se. It
smelled no worse than any other city they'd camped
in over the years, but even though he understood
the purpose of the trip, it grieved him to think that
a man could choose to spend his last moments on
140 earth in a place he'd never been to before. A dog
would never commit such a blunder. He would make
his peace with the world and then see to it that he
gave up the ghost on familiar ground. But Willy still
had two things to accomplish before he died, and
145 with characteristic stubbornness he'd gotten it into
his head that there was only one person who could
help him. The name of that person was Bea
Swanson, and since said Bea Swanson was last
known to be living in Baltimore, they had come to
150 Baltimore to find her. All well and good, but unless
Willy's plan did what it was supposed to do, Mr.
Bones would be marooned in this city of crab cakes
and marble steps, and what was he going to do
then? A phone call would have done the job in half
155 a minute, but Willy had a philosophical aversion to
using the telephone for important business. He
would rather walk for days on end than pick up one
of those contraptions and talk to someone he
couldn't see. So here they were two hundred miles
160 later, wandering around the streets of Baltimore

without a map, looking for an address that might or
might not exist.

165 Of the two things Willy still hoped to accomplish
before he died, neither one took precedence over
the other. Each was all-important to him, and since
time had grown too short to think of tackling them
separately, he had come up with what he referred
to as the Chesapeake Gambit: an eleventh-hour
170 ploy to kill both birds with one stone. The first has
already been discussed in the previous paragraphs:
to find new digs for his furry companion. The
second was to wrap up his own affairs and make
sure that his manuscripts were left in good hands.
175 At that moment, his life's work was crammed into a
rental locker at the Greyhound bus terminal on
Fayette Street, two and a half blocks north of
where he and Mr. Bones were standing. The key was
in his pocket, and unless he found someone worthy
180 enough to entrust with that key, every word he had
ever written would be destroyed, disposed of as so
much unclaimed baggage.

185 In the twenty-three years since he'd taken on the
surname of Christmas, Willy had filled the pages of
seventy-four notebooks with his writings. These
included poems, stories, essays, diary entries,
epigrams, autobiographical musings, and the first
eighteen hundred lines of an epic-in-progress,
190 Vagabond Days. The majority of these works had
been composed at the kitchen table of his mother's
apartment in Brooklyn, but since her death four
years ago he'd been forced to write in the open air,
often battling the elements in public parks and
195 dusty alleyways as he struggled to get his thoughts
down on paper. In his secret I heart of hearts, Willy
had no delusions about himself. He knew that he
was a troubled soul and not fit for this world, but
he also knew that much good work was buried in
200 those notebooks, and on that score at least he
could hold his head high. Maybe if he had been
more scrupulous about taking his medication, or
maybe if his body had been a bit stronger, or maybe
if he hadn't been so fond of malts and spirits and
205 the hubbub of bars, he might have done even more
good work. That was perfectly possible, but it was
too late to dwell on regrets and errors now. Willy
had written the last sentence he would ever write,
and there were no more than a few ticks left in the
210 clock. The words in the locker were all he had to
show for himself. If the words vanished, it would be
as if he had never lived. (Continues...)