

# **MacArthur Park: The Novel**



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**By John Ponton**

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For all those who were sacrificed to war, those who were changed by war and the rest of us who either know or remember both.

For my wife, children and family: Should we ever find ourselves faced with such turbulent times again, may we have the fortitude and courage to confront them as the characters portrayed herein.

The characters and events portrayed in this novel are purely fictional. Any resemblance to actual people and events is purely coincidental.

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## Chapter 1

### *I Shall Return*

When I think back to those turbulent times, I often wonder how I survived them. It seems that everyone had a price to pay in order to just maintain sanity. Conflicts were running rampant, right vs. left, wrong vs. right, black vs. white, young vs. old, hawks vs. doves, violence vs. nonviolence, peace versus war. And there I was in the middle of it all trying to grow up, trying to find myself, desperately trying to believe in something.

Somehow I did survive. Of course some of us did not. I have both fond and nightmarish memories of these people. They were eaten alive by one cause or another and then spit out to find that their lives were totally destroyed either physically or emotionally. Many died because of their beliefs. It was those of us who did not survive who made the rest of us angry, frustrated, rebellious and most of all confused. Although I have desperately tried to erase these events from my memory, they have become a

permanent part of my being. They are as much a part of me as my arms, my legs, and my heart.

When I think back to these times there is one focal point about which everything revolved. A sea of tranquility in a raging storm, a natural, calm retreat. A place to gain experience and lose one's virginity. It was here that I smoked my first cigarette, my first joint, drank my first beer, made love to my first girlfriend and met my best friend. It was here that I made decisions which would shape the future of my life, for better or for worse.

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As I ran up the stairway to the train terminal, my feet made a reverberating clapping sound as they hit each step. My legs were aching. It had been a long time since I had run this far.

Out of breath, I stopped at the top of the stairs and looked out over the park. A shudder ran through me as a large clap of thunder echoed through the station. A light rain began to fall. Determined to finish my mission, I took a few steps toward the end of the platform. That's when I noticed how the light from the lamp post bounced amongst the rain drops in front of me, producing a waterfall of glistening crystals.

I stopped and looked on for an instant. It was only an instant but it felt like forever.

God what was I doing here?

Where was Benny?

What was I going to do?

I had all the money I had managed to save in one pocket and my license and draft card in the other. My draft card. Would I burn it along with Benny tonight, or just give my money to him and let my draft board do as they pleased with me? Let's face it without Betty's help and inspiration and Mr. Christopher's guidance, a student deferment would be impossible to obtain. They were thousands of miles away now. Only Benny was left and his number was now up as well.

Should I go with him and fight against the war or stay and fight in the war?

Damn! It would have been so much easier if I had never met Benny. My father would have made the decision for me. If he'd had his way, I would have enlisted a year ago.

Damn you Benny!

I closed my eyes. The faces of people in my life started to flash before me: Benny, Betty, Mr. Christopher, my brother Davy, my father and mother, Mr. Wright, and of course my cousin Jim.

I opened my eyes, clenched my fist and shouted toward the falling crystals.

"Why now?.....Why me?"

The wind responded by doing an about face and blowing the crystals right into my face. Here they turned into drops of water that rolled down my cheeks. I closed my eyes again. My thoughts started to become more random.

What should I do?

Betty, help me.

Christopher, where are you?

Someone help me, please help me!

Why now . . . Why me?

I opened my eyes again. The falling crystals had returned to their original path.

How did I get here?

Where did this all start?

The last drop of rain slowly ran down my face, or was it a tear?

\*\*\*\*\*

I closed the door to the house and quickly started walking toward the park. There were several entrances. After much thought, I decided the entrance to the far north, the one furthest from the center of town, would be the best since there would be fewer people using it.

This was the most tranquil part of the park. The entrance was lined with pine and maple trees. There were several streams which could only be approached by climbing through dense underbrush. These streams traveled several miles only to empty into a huge lake at the southern edge of the park. This part was the most inhabited. Almost everybody walked their dogs there.

We'd even brought King there a few times. That's before they passed the laws. No dogs. No cats. No pets. No alcoholic beverages. No smoking. They put a fence up all around the lake which separated it from the rest of the park. They built a statue of a soldier and put it in the middle of the entrance. The inscription read "I shall return."

I entered the underbrush and pushed my way through until I reached the first stream. There was a clearing on the left bank. This was the one I usually visited whenever I needed to be alone and think things out. Whenever there were arguments that couldn't be resolved, a place no one knew about. A place where I could do what I wasn't allowed to do anywhere else.

I sat on a log near the stream and took the cigarettes out of my back pocket.

"Shit, I forgot the matches. Now what do I do?"

Totally frustrated, I sat back on the log and yelled "Shit" as loud as I could, confident that no one would hear me.

Just then I heard the bushes rustle behind me. Startled, I jumped up. A few seconds later the bushes parted and a black face appeared.

"What ya yelling about, white boy? Ya want ta get us all in trouble?"

"Ah, Ah, I'm sorry. I didn't know anybody was there."

"So what's ya problem, boy?"

"Ah damn I thought I'd come down here to have a quick smoke but I forgot the matches."

"Have no fear, Benny's here. So that means you've got some cigarettes. Great! It just so happens that I've got the fire."

"The fire?"

"Yeah the fire, ya fool the matches."

"Shit, that's great."

"That's what I just said, fool. Gimme a cigarette. I'll light us up."

"Okay."

I handed him a Newport from the box of cigarettes in my hand.

"Shit, don't tell me ya smoke these mentholated cigarettes. They'll burn ya lungs out."

“Burn my lungs out?”

I was quite surprised by this since this was my second pack and my lungs were not singed at least as far as I knew.

“Oh I get it. So ya don’t inhale.”

“Inhale. What’s that?”

“Look, watch me. Take a puff of smoke into your mouth and then breath it into ya lungs like you would normally do when ya breath.” Benny took a deep drag on his cigarette.

“Agh. Agh. Agh. Damn these menthol cigarettes burn ya lungs. Now you try it.”

I took a deep breath, puffed on the cigarette and inhaled it deep into my lungs. The burning started deep in my chest and quickly traveled up to my throat. When it finally reached my mouth, I was already coughing without control.

“Agh ... Agh ... Agh...” I gasped for breath, uncontrollably. By this time I was standing up, bent over at the waist, gagging and grasping for breath. My stomach started to churn and voice its disapproval.

“Are ya all right, boy?”

Shit, I thought to myself, what a stupid question. I must be turning bright green by now. At this point, I felt a hand pounding me on the back. I opened my mouth to tell this asshole to stop hitting me, but all that came out was my lunch. It landed right on my feet.

“Ha. Ha. Ha.”

All I heard was a shrieking laugh in the background.

“Don’t worry you’ll get use ta it afta awhile. Ya need more practice. I almost did the same thing the first time I inhaled the smoke.”

“Yeah, but I bet no one pounded ya on the back.”

“Relax boy, sit down, take a load off ya feet.”

“Relax . . . relax . . . ! Look at my new sneakers.” I shouted.

“Yeah ya white boys always have new white sneakers, don’t ya. I guess that’s tha last time you’ll have spaghetti for lunch. Ha. Ha. Ha . . .”

“Shut up, nigger.” I pushed him to the ground.

“Now listen here, whitey.” He got up and ran toward me. “Nobody calls me nigger unless I say so.”

He pushed me. I struggled to keep my balance but finally fell into the stream ass first. All I could hear were shrieks of laughter and the sounds of bushes giving way to a frenzied body. I stood up. I was drenched. And I was mad!

“Ya better run, nigger; if I catch ya I’m gonna kill ya.”

I stood in the middle of the stream looking down at my spaghetti stained sneakers.

“Ah shit,” I said half to myself. “How am I gonna explain this? I thought I was the only one who knew about this place. I’ll never come back here. I just can’t come back here now.”

I got up out of the stream and shook myself off like an old hound dog. Somehow during the skirmish both the cigarettes and the matches had become drenched with water as well.

I made my way back to the main path leading to the park entrance. I kept a sharp look out for anyone who knew me. If they saw me like this, they would be sure to tell my parents. It felt like the path would never end. Just then, I heard footsteps off to my left side. I scampered away into the underbrush. “Ouch” one of the branches scratched my arm.

A voice called out. “Who’s there?”

I immediately recognized the voice. It was my cousin Jim.

“Shit, I hope he can’t see me,” I thought to myself.

My cousin was a nice guy. He usually helped me a lot. I attributed most of my football and baseball skills to his patient teaching. He would say “no relative of mine is gonna bat less than 300, so concentrate and buckle down. But most of all no sex and no booze.” It wasn’t until much later that I understood that statement.

He was kind of protective in a strange sort of way. Unlike my parents, he would let me make mistakes all the time and then bail me out just in the nick of time. I guess that was good for his ego. He lived a few blocks away and he was a few years older than I was. We had a lot of good times, but he usually played by the rules. I couldn’t take a chance that he wouldn’t tell my parents or my aunt and uncle.

“Who’s there?” he repeated as he came closer to my hiding place under the dense brush. As usual he was dressed in army green, hip high boots with a B.B. gun in his hand. He enjoyed

coming down to the park and shooting at squirrels and anything else that moved.

“Who’s there? Come out or I’ll shoot!” He shouted.

It was scary. He looked like a real soldier. He parted the bushes to the left of me.

*“Halt! Who goes there?” Jim exclaimed as he peered out from his trench.*

*“Ah stuff it, Tuey. It’s just me, Patruski.”*

*“Shit, Patty, you better start following the regs., or some up tight brass is gonna have your ass in a ringer.”*

*“No shit Sherlock.”*

*“Hey what’s gotten into you lately?”*

*“Don’t know . . . let me think. Maybe it’s having all these fuckin people dying all around me all the time or maybe its just trying to figure out which of these fuckin gooks are the enemy so I can shoot them before they shoot me . . . what the fuck do you think?”*

*“Shit, Patty, lower your voice; you’ll get us both killed.”*

*“Have you ever asked yourself what the hell are we doing over here, Tuey?”*

*“No not really . . . well I mean . . .”*

*“You know how long people have been dying over here? Too god damn long, Tuey . . . too god damn long. Ya know the French got their ass kicked over here.”*

*“Yeah, but we’re not the French.”*

*“And the Japs before that.”*

*“Yeah but . . .”*

*“No buts, this place is a hell hole. We’re all gonna die here . . . you, me and every one of us.”*

*“Shit, you been reading that Cong propaganda shit again?”*

*Patruski pulled a pamphlet out of his pocket and thrust it at Jim.*

*“Read it, Jim. This war’s been going on for years and it’s gonna go on forever as far as I can see.”*

*A half dozen marines jumped into the trench firing back toward the enemy.*

*“Retreat . . . retreat . . . retreat!”*

*“Head for the bush!”*

*Jim ran out of the trench, bullets flying over his head as he parted the bushes.*

“Damn, that was a close one,” I thought to myself.

I started to shiver a little; a breeze had developed. This along with my soaking wet clothes caused chills to run up and down my spine. But I had to stay still cause he usually shot at anything that moved. I tried to move quietly deeper into the brush so that he wouldn’t see me, but I stepped on a branch. Crack! The noise resounded through the woods.

“Who’s there?” He demanded.

“Come out or I’ll shoot!”

I wondered which would be more painful, my cousin shooting me in the ass with his BB gun or my father kicking my ass with his big foot. Luckily two squirrels ran across the path chasing each other at top speed. My cousin followed. I waited until he was far enough away so that he could not see or hear me.

Not taking any chances, I scampered off into the deep underbrush. After a few hundred feet a small trail appeared. I followed this up to the roadway only to find that I was a few blocks off course. The houses on this street were much bigger than ours; some even had an upstairs and a downstairs.

I walked down the street passing house after humongous house until I came to the corner. Here was probably the biggest house in the neighborhood, perhaps in the whole town. It was completely blocked in by a brick and wood fence. The front yard was huge with several large oak trees in it. The lawn sprawled up to a giant, two story house with big, white pillars in front of it.

The gate was partially open, so I stuck my head in to see if I could spot anyone. Just then I heard a girl’s voice from the other side of the gate.

“Patrick, is that you?”

Shocked I quickly pulled my head back. It hit hard on the edge of the wooden part of the gate.

“Ouch!”

“Patrick, is that you?” the sweet voice asked again.

I was counting the stars in front of my eyes by this time.

The girl opened the gate to reveal herself. There she was, long blond hair, blue eyes, wearing shorts and a halter top. It was Betty, yeah Betty Koss, the new girl in my social studies class. I lost my tongue. I groped for something to say.

“Ah . . . Ah . . .”

“You’re in my social studies class, aren’t you?” She said

“Yeah. It’s me Patrick. Hi.”

“Well come in. I’m glad somebody’s finally come over to see me.”

Betty and her family had just moved into town from California. She was pretty, but more important was that she was from California. I always wanted to meet someone from California.

I stepped inside the gate and got a better view of the awesome house. It was enormous and besides that it even had a backyard which was bigger than the front yard.

“Do you live here?” I couldn’t believe I asked such a stupid question.

She smiled.

“Yeah . . . it’s big, huh.”

She looked at me and began to giggle.

“Looks like you’ve had some trouble.”

I looked down at my spaghetti-stained sneakers, my drenched clothes and felt my wet hair. God I must look like a drowned rat, I thought.

“Ah . . . Ah . . . I better go. I’m late.”

With that I scrambled out of the gate and ran down the block.

“Good bye.” I yelled back to her.

“Good bye . . . See ya tomorrow in school.” She replied.

I ran down to the end of the block and cut through the Meyer’s backyard, jumping the fences in single bounds as I made my way back home.

Once inside the back porch, I stopped to catch my breath. I looked inside the kitchen. Nobody. Luckily both the dog and mom were asleep in front of the T.V. Shit! What if dad’s home. I’ll just have to take the chance. I walked through the living room, down the hall and through the open door of the bathroom,

quickly shutting it behind me. I started the shower jumped in with my clothes on, and began to scrub my sneakers.

“Patrick, is that you?” My mother yelled. The noise had woken her up.

“Patrick, is that you?” she repeated. “Yes mom. I’m taking a shower.”

“Well hurry up, you’re late for dinner. Your father’s gonna be late as usual. We’ll have to eat without him.”

“Okay. I’ll be out in a few minutes.”

Boy. This is going to require a lot of thought. I’ll have to come up with a good one this time.