

THE TWO-BEAR
MAMBO

Joe R. Lansdale

Hachette Book Group USA



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The
Two-Bear
Mambo

JOE R.
LANSDALE



GRAND CENTRAL
PUBLISHING

NEW YORK BOSTON

Chapter One of this novel first appeared in a slightly different form in the August 1994 issue of *Cemetery Dance* magazine.

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For information address Grand Central Publishing, Hachette Book Group, 237 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10017.

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ISBN: 978-0-7595-2409-5

A hardcover edition of this book was published in 1995 by Mysterious Press.

First eBook Edition: May 2001

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*This one is for my family, Karen, Kasey and Keith.
Thanks for putting up with me.*

The rising world of waters dark and deep.

John Milton: *Paradise Lost*

1



When I got over to Leonard's Christmas Eve night, he had the Kentucky Headhunters turned way up over at his place, and they were singing "The Ballad of Davy Crockett," and Leonard, in a kind of Christmas celebration, was once again setting fire to the house next door.

I wished he'd quit doing that. I'd helped him the first time, he'd done it the second time on his own, and now here I was third time out, driving up. It was going to look damn suspicious when the cops got here. Someone had already called in. Most likely the assholes in the house. I knew that because I could hear sirens.

Leonard's boyfriend, Raul, was on the front porch of Leonard's house, his hands in his coat pockets, looking over at the burning and the ass-whipping that was taking place, and he was frantic, like a visiting Methodist preacher who'd just realized the head of the household had scooped up the last fried chicken leg.

I pulled my pickup into Leonard's drive, got out, went over and stood on the porch with Raul. It was cold out and our breath was frosty white. "What got this started?" I asked.

"Oh, hell, Hap, I don't know. You got to stop him before they haul his black ass to the calaboose."

"It's too late for that, they got him. Those sirens aren't for jaywalkers."

"Shit, shit, shit," Raul said. "I shouldn't never come to live with a macho queer. I should have stayed in Houston."

Raul was normally a pretty good-looking kid, but out here in the night, the house fire flickering orange lights across his face, he looked desiccated, like the victim of a giant spider. He was sort of wobbling back and forth, like a bowling pin that hadn't quite got nailed solid enough by the ball, watching Leonard drag a big black guy out of the burning house and onto the front porch over there. The guy's shirt and pants were on fire, and Leonard was kicking him off the porch and across the front yard.

I recognized the guy. Mohawk they called him, 'cause of his haircut, though, after this night, they might just call him Smoky. Mohawk and a friend of his had once jumped on me and Leonard and we'd whipped their asses. I still dreamed about it at nights when I needed something to cheer me up.

Other folks were coming out of the house through the windows and the back door, scrambling for the woods out back. None of them seemed securely on fire, but a few had been touched by flames. A short stocky woman was in the lead. She wore only a brown bathrobe and some floppy house shoes and had a wig in her right hand. Her

short legs flashed when she ran and the house coat moved and her breath went out and whiffed back in cool, white bursts. The wig was slightly on fire. She and her smoking hair hat and flopping bathrobe disappeared into the woods at a run and the others followed suit, melting into the timber with her, leaving in their wake a trail of scorched clothing smoke. A moment later they had vanished as handily as a covey of quail gone to nest.

The fire truck screamed into sight, and damn near hit Mohawk after Leonard swiveled a hip into him and twisted and tossed him into the street. The fella rolled on across, banged the curbing on the other side, and the fire truck swerved and ran up on the lawn of the burning house, and Leonard had to jump for it.

One good thing, though, all that rolling had put Mohawk's fire out. You know how it goes, that old advice the fire department gives you, "stop, drop, and roll," and that's what Mohawk was doing. Thanks to Leonard.

If you took the rose-colored view, you might say Leonard was doing nothing more than saving Mohawk's worthless life.

'Course now, Leonard had gone back into the house and a short black guy with his hair on fire came out on the end of Leonard's foot, and when he hit the lawn he got up running toward Leonard's house, Leonard yelling at his back, "Run, you goddamn little nigger."

I tell you, Leonard standing on the front porch, smoke boiling out behind him, fire licking out the windows, the roof peaked with a hat of flame, it caused Leonard's face to appear as if it had been chipped from obsidian. He was like some kind of backwoods honky nightmare vision of the Devil—a nigger with a bad attitude and the power of fire. Come to think of it, the black folks in that house probably saw him as pretty devilish as well. Leonard can be irritating to most anybody when he wants to be.

I left Raul standing on the porch about the time the little guy came out on the end of Leonard's foot, walked over and into the yard where Leonard was practicing arson and ass-whipping, put my leg out and tripped the little guy as he ran by.

He got up and I slapped him down with the side of my hand and put my foot on the back of his neck and reached down and scooped up some loose dirt in the driveway and dumped it on top of his head.

It put the fire out, except for the patch of hair burning low on the back of his head, like a spark in steel wool. The rest of his skull was smoking like a dry cabbage with a cinder in it. His body gave off quite a bit of heat, and he was wiggling as if he were being cooked alive. He was making a kind of bothersome noise that was so shrill it made my buttocks crawl up my back.

"I'm burning here," he said. "I'm burning."

"It's okay," I said. "There's not much hair left."

The cops got there then. Couple of cruisers and Sergeant Charlie Blank in his unmarked job. Charlie—wearing some of Kmart's finest, including high-gloss, black genuine plastic shoes that shone brightly in the light of the house fire—got out slowly, like his pants might rip.

He paused long enough to watch one of the blue-suit cops nab Mohawk, cuff him, and slam him in the back of a cruiser, after "accidentally" bumping his head into the car door while helping him inside.

Charlie came over to me, gave me a sad look, sighed, pulled out a cigarette,

stooped, lit it off the little guy's head, and said, "I'm fucking tired of this, Hap. Leonard's giving me gray hairs. What with the Chief in cahoots with the bad guys and Lieutenant Hanson acting like he's got a weight tied to his dick all the time, I can't think straight. Get your foot off that fucker's neck."

I did, and the little guy, who hadn't yet stopped whimpering, came up on his knees and slapped at the back of his neck with a yell. The fire had already gone out, giving itself up to Charlie's cigarette, but I think the slapping bit made that dude feel better.

Charlie looked at him, said, "Lay down, buddy, and stay there."

The guy lay down. His head was smoking a lot less now.

"You know I got to run Leonard in?" Charlie said.

"I know. I thought you didn't smoke?"

"I started. I start two or three times a year. I like to quit so I can really enjoy it when I start back. I got to run you in too."

"I didn't do anything. I was just puttin' this guy out. I threw dirt on his head."

"You got a point. The dirt could make things all right." He said to the guy on the ground, "You think he was putting the fire out, sir?"

"Shit, man, that motherfucker tripped my black ass and knocked the dog shit out of me. I'm gonna file on his ass. I'm gonna file on everygoddamnbody."

"See there, Hap, got to run you in."

"Would it make any difference if I said when I hit him it hurt my hand?"

"I'll put that in my notes. You know, being this close to the fire, it's kinda warm. Toasty even. Very Christmas-like."

"That's Leonard," I said. "Always festive."

"The Ballad of Davy Crockett" was long gone and the Kentucky Headhunters were singing "Big Mexican Dinner."

"I keep trying to figure that song is offensive to Hispanics or not," Charlie said, "way the guy does that corny Meskin accent. You think it's offensive?"

"I don't know, ask Leonard's boyfriend, Raul. He could tell you. He's Mexican. But I can let you in on this, Leonard was using some bad language a while ago."

"Uh oh. I'll put that in my notes too."

"He called the young man on the ground here the N word."

"That's right," said the young man on the ground. "And in the house, he called me a motherfucker too."

"Wait a minute," Charlie said. "I got a problem here. Being how Leonard's black, is that racist? I mean, me or you said it, it's racist, but it's okay a black guy uses the N word, ain't it?"

"Changing times," I said. "It's hard to keep up. If it's not racist, I think it may be politically incorrect."

"There you are," Charlie said. "That's it. Politically incorrect. I think there's some kind of fine for that."

"Man, this is some shit," said the guy on the ground. "Let me up. Someone sees me layin' here, it ain't gonna look good."

"You think we got you out here to style?" Charlie said. "Shut the fuck up." Then to me: "Think Leonard's finished?"

"Well, the house is lit up good."

And it was. The fire peaked and popped and rose up into the night sky like a red

demon, roiled and licked around the blackened frame of the house. Lumber screeched and sagged. The heat was not quite as pleasant as before. I said, "It was nice of you to stand here and wait."

"Hey," Charlie said, his face popping sweat in the firelight, "Christmas Eve."

Charlie looked at the firemen who were standing by with their hoses, and gave them a wave. They didn't exactly rush, but they went over to wash the place down, get it ready for the dozer to come in and push the burnt lumber around, make room for the dopers to bring in a new crack house.

And they would. Rumor was, the Police Chief had friends who had connections to the LaBorde dope traffic, and he liked to help them out for a little slice of the pie. Rumors like that could make a man cynical, even one of my naive and trusting nature.

When I was growing up, guy with a badge was just assumed to be honest, and the Lone Ranger didn't shoot bad guys in the head either. These days, Jesus would carry a gun, and the disciples would hold down and corn-hole their enemies.

"You think Leonard will do time for this one?" I asked.

"So far he hasn't, and I'll do what I can. A night in jail, maybe. But I keep him out of bad stuff this time, you got to make him understand he needs a new hobby. I know a hobby has done wonders for me. I used to be tense, then I got a hobby. You know, I don't get Leonard. I thought queers were into passive stuff. Like knitting and bridge."

"Don't even let him hear you say that," I said. "The passive part, I mean."

"You can bet I won't."

"I'll tell him," said the guy on the ground.

"You do," Charlie said, "And I'll stomp a mud hole in your head."

"I'm cool," said the guy on the ground.

Leonard strolled over to us then. He looked a little bushed.

"Charlie," he said.

"Howdy," Charlie said. "Okay, Leonard, you and Hap get in the cruiser . . . wait a minute. I'm gonna handcuff you together."

"Come on, Charlie," I said. "I didn't do anything, really."

"You hit this young gentleman. Put your hands out, both of you. Supposed to handcuff you with separate handcuffs, behind your back, but like I said, it's fuckin' Christmas Eve."

We were about to be handcuffed when Raul came over and took Leonard by the arm and started to cry. "Don't," Leonard said. "I can't stand all that cryin'. You're always cryin'."

"I'm fucking emotional," Raul said.

"Well, cut that cryin' shit. It makes me nervous."

"I'm crying, not you, so what are you embarrassed about?"

"It's got nothing to do with embarrassment."

"Hell," Raul said, and he tugged on Leonard's arm, but Leonard wouldn't look at him.

"Sorry, Raul," Charlie said. "You got to let him go. You want to see him, come down to the station. We got special times for asshole viewing."

"No," Raul said, letting go of Leonard's arm. "I won't be here when you get back, Leonard."

"Don't let the screen door hit you in the ass on the way out," Leonard said.

“You could ask me not to leave.”

“I didn’t ask you to leave in the first place.”

Raul looked at Leonard for a moment, pushed his dark hair out of his eyes, turned and walked back to Leonard’s house. He moved as if he were carrying a piano on his back.

“Shit, Leonard,” I said, “Raul is just worried about you.”

“Yeah, Leonard,” Charlie said, “you don’t always got to be an asshole.”

“Man, you are one cold dude,” said the guy on the ground. “I wouldn’t talk to my woman that way, and she’s stupid as a stick. You homos, man, y’all are chill motherfuckers.”

“Shut up,” said Charlie. “This ain’t your business.”

“Man,” said the guy on the ground, “Merry fucking Christmas.”

“Here,” Charlie said, “hold out a hand.”

He handcuffed me and Leonard together and sent us over to the unmarked. Part of the neighborhood was standing out on the curb watching the crack house burn. One old man, Mr. Trotter, stood there with his arms crossed inside a coat a grizzly bear might have worn. He was smoking a cigar. He said, “Of them three fires, this one’s the best, Leonard.”

“Thanks,” Leonard said. “It’s the practice makes the difference.”

We got in the unmarked. We watched through the window as Charlie got the little guy off the ground and into an armlock and walked him toward a blue suit who came over and put the guy in handcuffs and shoved him into the back of the cruiser with Mohawk.

A handful of blue suits were combing the woods out back, and we could see one cop coming out with the bathrobed woman in tow. She was cuffed and had on her wig, which was giving off a faint trail of light gray smoke in the moonlight. She was cussing a blue streak. We could hear her with the windows rolled up. She was good at including “you fuckin’ pale-dicked ass licker” into all her sentences without it sounding strained or overworked.

Leonard settled back in his seat and sighed slowly. “Shit,” he said. “Raul’s right. I always got to be the tough guy. I really like that fag. Really. Why have I always got to play it tough?”

“You’re black and gay and inadequate sexually, and therefore find yourself doubly oppressed by white society, as well as being ill-suited emotionally for adjusting to the macho, black community that is your birthright.”

“Oh yeah. That’s right. I forgot.”

“You also smell like a smoked ham.”

Charlie slid in behind the wheel and closed the door, sharply. “We’re leaving a couple of cops here to watch your house, Leonard. Make sure Raul’s okay too. Least till he gets packed up and out. He said he’s, and I quote, ‘gone like the fucking wind,’ unquote.”

“All right,” Leonard said. “Thanks.”

“Will he really go?” I asked.

“Who’s to say?” Leonard said.

Charlie cranked the car. Leonard said, “Could we stop for ice cream before we go in?”

“It’s cold for ice cream,” Charlie said.

“I like it anyway,” Leonard said. “So, what do you say? I’m kinda depressed.”

“I don’t see why not,” Charlie said. “Frozen yogurt all right? I’m on a diet.”

“Suits me,” Leonard said. “You’re paying though. I don’t have my wallet on me.”

“I’m not paying shit,” Charlie said. “You brought it up, you treat. Damn, Leonard, you’re making my eyes burn.”

“It’s that cheap paneling in the house,” Leonard said. “It goes up quick and stinks and the stink gets on you. Fucking walls are like they’re made out of starter logs, which I guess is okay, seeing how I’m lighting the fire.”

“I didn’t hear you say that,” said Charlie.

“I got money,” I said. “My treat all around.”

Charlie eased away from the curb. I took a last look at the burning house. Some timbers were sagging and crashing in with an explosion of sparks and smoke. Raul was standing on Leonard’s porch watching us drive by. Leonard looked in Raul’s direction. Neither of them waved.

I said, “Oh, Leonard, don’t let me forget. We ever get back, I got your Christmas present in the pickup.”

“Yeah, well,” Leonard said, “I hope it ain’t HIS and HIS towels.”

2



We were in Lieutenant Hanson's office finishing off what was left of our yogurt cones, but the Lieutenant wasn't there. Considering we hadn't bought him anything, I guess that was best.

Charlie was sitting behind Hanson's desk. I was in a chair against one wall, and Leonard was in a chair against the other. We were supposed to be in a cell like Mohawk and the little guy with the burned head and the others, but we weren't. You might say we were getting special treatment. We were also getting a shadow show.

Charlie had the overhead light out and he had the desk lamp on, and he was using his fingers to throw shadows on the wall, make shapes. He did a pretty good dog and duck, but after that everything else looked like a spider.

"How about that?" Charlie said. "How's that?"

"It still looks like a spider," I said.

"I got to practice some more," Charlie said. "I got me a book now. Wife says I ought to have a hobby, so I got this. It relaxes me, but the wife thinks it ain't much. She wants me to go to the gym and work out, but this way, I can stay home and sit in the easy chair with the big light out, use the end-table light to throw a few shadows. I get tired of it, I watch a little TV. Look here, this one looks like a pussy, don't it?"

"How in hell do you get a cat out of that?" I said.

"No, a pussy. You know, a vagina. Women have 'em."

"Oh, yeah," I said. "I faintly remember."

"Look here, it does, don't it? It's kind of a dark V, ain't it?"

"It looks like a spider with its legs pulled in," Leonard said. "And don't tell me that book of yours has a section on shadow vaginas."

Charlie stuck out his middle finger and wiggled it. "This one's for you, Leonard."

A blue suit opened the door and light flooded in and the blue suit came in with it. He stopped and looked at Charlie and Charlie's hand shadow.

"What's this look like to you?" Charlie asked him.

"What?"

"The shadow, Jake, the shadow."

"Oh. I don't know. It looks like a shadow."

"Swell," Charlie said.

"Hey, listen," Jake said. "Chief ain't in—"

"Surprise, surprise," Charlie said.

"And Lieutenant Hanson's out."

“He’s on his way.”

“Well, we got a guy in cell three, he wants we should call his wife, tell her to tape a *National Geographic* special on bears. We got to do it now, he gets to catch it. It starts in fifteen minutes.”

“What?” Charlie asked.

“He’s gonna miss it,” Jake said. “’Cause he’s gonna be here tonight. Drunk and disorderly.”

“What the hell does he think we’re running here?” Charlie said, not looking at Jake, but wiggling his fingers in such a way that brought him back to his shadow shape standards. A dog, which he made a barking sound for, then a duck, which he quacked for.

“I’ll tell him no,” Jake said.

“I guess you will,” Charlie said. “I can’t believe you came to me with that shit. Wait a minute.” Charlie swiveled in the chair and looked at the cop. “A *National Geographic* special?”

“On bears,” Jake said.

“Hell, call her. I ought to be glad it’s not *Charlie’s Angels*, some shit like that. Maybe we’re getting a better class of criminal in here. Go on and do it.”

“All right,” Jake said, and closed the door.

“Can we go?” Leonard said.

Charlie was back to trying to make a pussy. I think.

“Go?” Charlie said. “You fuckin’ me? You burned your next-door neighbor’s house down. That’s three times, man. First time you and Hap did it, we worked it out. Second time you did it, we worked it out. But you’re gonna have to take up shadow shapes or something, Leonard. Quit this arson. We could put you behind bars so long, you got out, hair on your balls would be white.”

“They’re scum, Charlie,” Leonard said, “and you know it.”

“I went around burning houses belonged to scum, this town would mostly be a cinder.”

“Bullshit,” Leonard said.

In the middle of our examining another of Charlie’s shadow shapes, the door opened again. It was Lieutenant Marvin Hanson this time. He was framed by the hall light behind him, and it made him look like the Golem. His black skin was all shadow and no features. He watched Charlie a second, then closed the door and turned on the light. I suddenly realized I preferred looking at him in the dark. That rugged face of his could be scary.

“Talent show’s over,” Hanson said. “And so’s sitting behind my desk.”

“Yassuh,” Charlie said, and he eased out from behind the desk and took a chair and lit a cigarette.

Hanson went over and sat down behind his desk, swiveled his chair and looked at Leonard.

“Well, well,” Hanson said, “If it isn’t the Smartest Nigger in the World.”

“Hi,” Leonard said.

“That’s the N word again,” Charlie said to me.

“Yes,” I said, “but it’s two black guys talking to one another, so we’ve got the same problem as before. Is it racist, politically incorrect, or all in fun?”

“Ain’t nothing fun about it,” Hanson said. Then to Leonard: “You dumb motherfucker. I’m sick of your goddamn cavalier attitude.”

“They killed a kid last year,” Leonard said.

“He took the dope on his own,” Hanson said.

“He was a kid,” Leonard said.

“All right, all right, one house burning is okay,” Hanson said. “But twice? Then three times? You got to respect my position here.”

“Your goddamn Chief of Police has ties to the fucks who provide that house, and you know it,” Leonard said.

“That’s a point for Leonard,” Charlie said. “He’s right. You know it, I know it, the guys in the slammer know it. They know too they’ll be out of here come morning. If it takes that long. They’ll be suing Leonard, most likely.”

“Shut up, Charlie,” Hanson said.

“Yassuh, Massuh Marvin.”

“That’s kinda racist, isn’t it?” I said to Charlie. “A white guy doing slave talk?”

“Think so?” Charlie said.

“Will you two assholes shut up?” Hanson said.

I could see “Yassuh” forming on Charlie’s lips, but he decided to just wiggle them instead. Wise choice, I thought.

“What are these two fucks doing in here watching you and your fucking shadows?” Hanson said. “Why ain’t they in a cell?”

“I figured they were kind of guests,” Charlie said. “I mean, hell, I like ’em.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t,” Hanson said. “Especially the Smartest Nigger in the World here. He’s always doing what he wants. He doesn’t think the law applies to him. He’s some kind of crusader. Some kind of vigilante. Yes sir, he’s the Smartest Nigger in the World.”

“I don’t know,” said Leonard. “I hear great stuff about you and Jesse Jackson.”

Hanson moved suddenly, and considering his size, it was a fast move. He grabbed the lamp on his desk and jerked it hard enough the plug came out. He threw it at Leonard, who slipped casually sideways in his chair, as if avoiding a punch. The lamp went by and hit the wall and exploded. Leonard and Hanson both stood up.

There was a beat of silence during which a lot of things could have happened, but didn’t. Finally, Leonard smiled. Then Hanson smiled. Hanson and Leonard slowly sat back down. Hanson said, “Shit, my ex-wife gave me that desk lamp.”

“And what a special little prize it was,” I said.

“What I do when I lose a family heirloom,” Charlie said, “is I go get drunk.”

“That sounds about right,” Hanson said. “Boys, get your coats.”

3



Hanson said, “Can you believe that, two bears fuckin’, right there on the television set?”

We were at Hanson’s house watching the *National Geographic* special. Hanson and Charlie were drinking lots of beer. Leonard was nursing one, and I was having a Sharp’s nonalcoholic beer. I’d given up drinking because I thought it was stupid and expensive and not very healthy.

Beer, however, didn’t hurt Hanson’s and Charlie’s feelings.

Charlie said, “Actually, Marve, my man. Them bears are neither on, nor in, the set. Those bears fucking is recorded on videotape or something. Then they play it back so we can see it. You see those trees? That grass? It’s spring there behind them. That means those bears could have done this fucking a year or two ago. Anytime really.”

Hanson wasn’t paying attention. He took another drink from his can of Schlitz, said, “Can you believe that shit? I was a kid, they wouldn’t show two dogs one behind another for fear you might think one was gonna mount the other. And now, right there, in front of God and everybody, two bears doing the mambo.”

“That’s kind of a sexy angle too,” Charlie said. “Only thing we’re missing here is a diagram showing us the inside of the girl bear’s ass, so we can see the boy bear’s dick swell into a knot. They do that, I think. Like a dog.”

Not being specialists on bear’s dicks, none of us responded. We didn’t want to look like fools.

The bears on the special finished up the mambo, as Hanson called it. Neither of them lit a cigarette, but they both looked fairly satiated. The camera cut to a guy in khakis. He was talking about bears as he walked. The guy came across a pile of bear shit in the woods and you’d have thought he’d found a fifty-dollar bill. He whisked that shit around with a stick and told us about the health of the bear that had left it. In fact, he told us everything about that bear but its blood type and hat size. I was impressed. I know how to track in the woods, know most of the species of trees and bushes, and can tell some basic things about critters from their stool, provided I have the urge to stir their shit around with a stick. But this guy was remarkable. It just looked like a pile of bear shit to me, but here he was seeing all kinds of stuff in it.

I wondered if you went to college to learn about bear shit.

The bear show was pretty good, but I got to admit, I burned out on it. I think decoding bear shit was about as far as my interest in bears went, and I felt uncomfortable at Hanson’s house. I kept fearing Florida would come in. It was bad