Eras of history are defined by events even if they are named by the calendar. Just as the true beginning of the 20th century was announced by the guns of August 1914, so a case can be made that the American '60s were born sometime in the mid-1950s with the rise of Elvis Presley and the publication of "On the Road." And the '60s were finished two years shy of 1970, with Martin Luther King shot dead on a Memphis motel balcony, the National Guard patrolling burning cities, Robert Kennedy bleeding to death in a shadowy Los Angeles corridor and a police riot in Chicago with the whole world watching.

The time of Lester Goran's new novel, "Bing Crosby's Last Song," is the cataclysmic summer of 1968, and immediately, with that marvelous title and the first sentence, we know we are in the precincts of regret, grief and loss: "On a fine spring day in 1968, Daly Racklin, six months short of fifty, was told by a doctor at the Montefiore Hospital in Pittsburgh that he had less than a year to live."

Not only is Daly's number up, but death, dying and endgames are everywhere. His Uncle Finnerty lies comatose in a hospital. A friend dies after a drinking and whoring bout while attending Robert Kennedy's funeral. And, most important, the Irish neighborhood of Oakland is on its way out through the expansion of the University of Pittsburgh, which "brought hospitals and lots where there had been restaurants and shoemaker shops on Forbes and reached everywhere." Parking lots stood where once one knew the names of everyone in a certain house: uncles, cousins, the cats and dogs. Gone. Brushed aside by an idea going somewhere.

The story, in weaker hands, could easily be a long take on a man crying in his beer, but it is elevated by humor, an effortless, bemused, elegant style, and the figure of Daly himself. He is the neighborhood lawyer who describes his practice by saying, "I rearrange other people's furniture because I know what it's like to live in a disorderly house of my own." Haunted by nearly every person and memory he encounters, Daly hears his name called when no one's there, has taken to relaxing in cemeteries and hallucinating the legendary outlaw Pretty Boy Floyd, who, in so many words, reminds him that he who risks nothing gains nothing.

He helps his friends and clients, from a man who calls in a stupor, holding an ax over a dead body, to a woman who is slowly, literally turning to stone. He drinks too much and has too little sex, is a good man and a funny one, wise enough to know what Yevtushenko knows: "We live, dying is not our business . . ."

Goran, author of the brilliant "Tales From the Irish Club," has produced what we look for in fiction -- a whole world. Oakland is an insular Irish community of bachelors and big families, spinsters and serious saloons, obsessed by language, the past, blasphemy and piety, a place where a man disturbed by the present "retreated to thoughts of Ireland now, the green fields, the fine stallions, the stalls with produce on corners, Dublin with its laughter in the streets, as a place he would never leave -- though he had never been there." There are vast mysteries and banal secrets, complicated people trying to live simple lives, and vice versa. Daly is not only part of it, he knows he's essential: the fixer, the port in the storm, the counsel.

His grief is enormous. "The old street: Would it be spared in the general carnage waged by Pitt? St. Agnes's entombed under a locker room for visiting golf pros . . . All places not Oakland were not real to him. He had learned from geography that he belonged somewhere more than anywhere else." Sentimental but hardheaded, Daly can make peace with it -- "It was a matter of a certain pride: Live with the ruts in the road and not a discussion about them."

Goran has shown the heartlessness of America, not just the cruel and absurd political theater that is a distant but distinct noise here but the manic love of the new, the fear of and distaste for the established. This novel will be compared to the work of William Kennedy. But it seems that Goran should be linked more to Don DeLillo, another magician who can produce, all of a piece, what John Cheever called "the enduring past."

By Ambrose Clancy, author of "Blind Pilot" and "Night Line."

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