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When Lonesome Rains Come Close Inside

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WHEN LONESOME RAINS COME CLOSE INSIDE

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY

MARY KATHERINE SPAIN

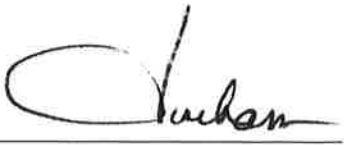
2016

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING


June 1, 2016

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Mary Katherine Spain entitled *When Lonesome Rains Come Close Inside* be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts.




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ABSTRACT

In “Out Shelby,” we witness the corrosive effects of familial co-dependency and manipulation in rural Kentucky and the struggles of its ten-year old female narrator, Laura Neil, as she tries to protect the one thing she can relate to: the family hound dog; “Take My Hand” is an urban caper that explores the dependency of strangers in the struggle for self-preservation and the comic relief such shenanigans can often yield; “Look for the Octopus” follows a loosely-tethered elementary school teacher named Penelope Richards as she attempts to protect her opus, a school musical she has written and produced; “A Fortune” examines the malady of malaise brought on by too much affluence as we witness the emotional blunting its worried-well main character, Gillian, is forced to subsist on. The collection closes with an excerpt from a novel-in-progress entitled, *Fiddler’s Reach*. A story whose chapters are told through three alternating narrators, *Fiddler’s Reach* explores forbidden love and its impact on the lives of the characters Junebug, Michael, and Nora. The excerpt includes the first three chapters of the novel.

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PREFACE

Words, Sentences, Paragraphs

I am a writer. The adage, “A writer writes,” is true enough and yet terminally insufficient for what a writer actually does, what a writer must engage with in order to create. If stringing coherent words together on the page and making them pleasant or informative were enough, then lots of people would “be” writers. Additionally, if adhering to the mechanics of grammar and mastering the elements of style were all it took to “be” a writer, then would-be writers would claim the status decisively, arriving in creative writing programs in droves, happy to contend with the minutia of word choice, sentence structure and tone, among other craft particulars. But these qualifying factors do not a writer make, although they do provide the necessary starter-kit. Being a writer means having the aptitude to operate on two different planes of reality simultaneously and with vigor, meanwhile managing the lost art of alchemy in a way that is effortless and enjoyable.

The first plane of reality consists of the surface level of experience and requires a writer to have a keen observation of the world and its inhabitants. This generalization can be broken down into having a good memory, challenging the conventional wisdom, appreciating a wide array of peoples with different backgrounds and belief systems. It also means knowing the difference between judgement and simply being able to form an opinion after paring down a thing to its essence. The second plane of reality in which a writer must consistently be participating is not as easily described because it is nebulous

and requires a writer to pierce the surface of the material plane. To borrow a term whose origin can be traced to the wisdom teachings of Carlos Castaneda's fabled teacher, Don Juan, and recast in the writings of Michael Harner, in his seminal book, *The Way of the Shaman*, this ability to sense what is happening beyond the alpha state of experience can be defined as the "second attention." Second attention is the ability to intuit subtle changes in behavior and assess how those changes may affect a circumstance or outcome. This acumen of second attention challenges the very assumptions of reality itself and therefore the structure of the Life-Narrative that says, "This happened, then this other thing happened." Since the dawn of civilization, humans have been able to survive through the act of telling stories in this linear fashion. Stories also root human beings to a place, a tribe, or a land in order to build a sense of belonging. "Narrative is the fundamental mode of human knowledge," so wrote Brian Richardson in *Narrative Dynamics*. Human knowledge is the purvey of the story-teller and while the surface level of keen observation is a requirement of the writer, second attention requires that the writer not only sense what is happening below the surface but to extrapolate the significance of that undefined energy and re-route it to the page. By doing so, an unknowable mystique flavors the words, sentences, and paragraphs in a way that is experienced on a deeper level of engagement for the alpha-state reader. How many times has someone read a passage in a book and reported it as being haunting, provocative, or beautiful but could not explain why or how? A case of words failing to define an emotional response? No. It is unwaveringly the success of a writer's second attention.

If story was born out of the necessity to share knowledge—whether to report danger or connect to the tribe—its additional evolution has worked to evoke

contemplation as well as provide entertainment. Story has always been a way of taking its listener out of their present reality. In many ways, the community shaman also had to take himself out of his present reality in order to bring back needed information. A shaman is a walker between the worlds, and therefore the second attention asks the writer to become a shaman by willingly traversing into the dark interior of the creative force. As the ancient practitioners brought back reassurance, healing and even prophecy from their psychic journeys, the writer-shaman also returns from an internal journey in alchemy, transforming all they have seen and sensed into gold, employing words for that representation. The writer may also accept the responsibility of exposing injustices, prejudices, and other types of injurious indoctrinations of a society through the vehicle of story. In this way, the second attention of the writer falls to checking her own biases, compelling her to ruminate and reflect upon how the imprints of parents and society have colored her renderings. This endeavor is not something any creative writing program can teach a student of writing for it is a life-long undertaking. There are some, however, whose programs provide an exceptional and rigorous model on which to commence such a journey.

I am proud and grateful to say that the Stonecoast MFA Program in Creative Writing is one such program. It has not only deepened my understanding of the craft of writing but also tuned my second attention to a precision I never could have dreamed of before. I have been invited to check my “blind spots” and investigate any incongruences in my beliefs but also to stand up for what I know is my truth. My confidence has been re-shaped through the commendable and inspiring faculty, ever-persistent in pushing their mentees to the next level of development. Before being accepted into the program,

I'd spent thirteen long years at a medical practice explaining to patients how to get adequately cleaned out for a colonoscopy, among other riveting conversations. Like many artists, I did not believe that making art would yield enough success, either financially or culturally. Fear is a noxious vapor that can knock out the most determined dreamer, and I fell victim to the fumes for a long time.

My second attention was born early. I grew up in Siler City, North Carolina, population 4,689 in 1971. Siler City's claim to fame was a place called the Devil's Stomping Ground (or 'Tramping Ground,' depending on what part of North Carolina you're from). A perfectly-worn patch of dirt in Chatham County refused plants to sprout or trees to take root, and was rumored to be where the Devil himself dreamed up creative ways to swindle, curse and possess the God-fearing and good-natured folks of Earth. Forging a path with his cloven feet as they paced hour after nightly hour, the abysmal Devil of legend created his circle of plight. No one dared walk out to the place alone or at night, as it was said to be haunted and full of evil. But there were some who did, and those who said they did. The ones who said they did talked big about the screams they heard and the red, glowing eyes they saw in the copse of trees. The ones who had camped overnight at the Devil's Stomping Ground did not talk about it.

How is a little girl who grew up with such a legend supposed to resist the mysteries of the supernatural? I received the message that, despite attending First Baptist Church every Sunday, my family chose to live in this dangerous spot, where the Devil devised his most wicked plans. The other claim to fame which Siler City could boast was that it was the home to Aunt Bee, the dowdy, large-bosomed matron of the popular *Andy Griffith Show* (which we always just called, "Mayberry"). Between Aunt Bee and Satan, I

tended toward Satan. Not in a traditional “satanic” way but I was intrigued early on by the darker mysteries of life.

After 1982, the Devil’s Stomping Ground was relegated to myth as we moved away from Siler City. My family moved frequently in the years leading up to my entry into college, and I assign the constant transitions growing up to my initial exposure to the second attention: three different high schools in three different states over a four-year span meant I was always the new girl up for inspection. Throughout these formative years, I developed a way to intuit what people thought of me, which bubbled over into becoming hyper-sensitive about how they would react to a variety of situations and stimuli. Like any teenager, I aimed to be liked and accepted; little did I know the strains of perception were beginning to ferret themselves into the columns of surface reality and what was happening below the surface, in service to the writer awaiting to be born inside of me.

Graduate school has been one series of initiations. From my very first workshop, I was challenged by fellow students regarding the depiction of a character who was of Native American heritage. “How,” they asked, “do you know what his experience might be like?” The message I received was that although creative writers can “make up” any character they chose, writers who have taken steps to broaden their understanding of other peoples’ experiences do not rely on stereotypes of any group to fuel their writing. More importantly, they asked me if I was willing to defend my characterization and to what extent? I felt a surge of uncertainty and angst around these deliberations and committed to spending my first semester at Stonecoast reading and annotating books that were written by authors who were of different ethnic backgrounds or who were

differently gendered than the characters they wrote about. Through the astute guidance of Suzanne Strempek Shea, my awareness around agency to write certain characters amplified, eventually leading me to community events such as the one on micro-aggressions, put on by the University of New England in the fall of 2014. The headliner was a speaker named Arabella Perez, whose account of a micro-aggression by a college advisor sent her down a path of social work instead of pursuing a Ph. D. in English literature, presumably because a choice of social work would provide her the chance to “do something good for your people.” I knew I had to meet Arabella, and so tracked her down easily in this age of information. After a few emails, she agreed to let me interview her for my last annotation. In that interview, she told me a much longer version of her “micro” bruising from the college advisor. She wanted to know, exactly, who “her” people were?

My second semester at Stonecoast was no less initiatory and took the form of delving into creative non-fiction. Because the program allows for a cross-genre semester, I decided to stretch myself emotionally and experience with the personal essay. Most of these essays centered around my first marriage, which was tumultuous and abusive, and my deep love for the man to whom I was married. With the patient and caring support of Debra Marquart, I challenged all the tenets in the memoir-writing books I was annotating to ask the question: If memoir writing relies on memory and, “what you make of it,” as Hampl wrote in *I Could Tell You Stories*, then how might a writer who can recall memories from past lives proceed in re-shaping the past? I strongly believe that my ex-husband and I have spent past lives together, and continue to meet again and again to balance our karmic bank account through violence, love, retribution and reckoning.

Writing about our lives in 1996 or 910 proved both difficult and enlightening, presenting yet another tool for my writer shed: I had recovered a piece of my Self by writing “to find out what I know,” to borrow another one of Hampl’s defining guidelines for non-fiction writing of the personal sort. I hunted my truth by looking at my life with Sean and what that phase of life had granted me in terms of survival. The past informs the present, both intimately and historically, and a writer who is in full engagement with her interior fights with the mask of nostalgia and revisionist leanings, unable to truly embrace her truth until it is on the page. Although my thesis does not include any of the personal narratives I produced with Debra, my aperture is now fashioned more deftly on what telling the meta-story of dangerous love means, for it is the subject of my novel. I could not have done this without first accepting that, like my novel’s main character Adeliene, I too had paid a high price for loving someone who wasn’t healthy for me.

As if deconstructing racial and ethnic blind spots and writing about abusive episodes with a former spouse were not initiatory enough, I entered my third semester with the intention of defining what a shadow narrative may entail. I had two weighty subjects which I set out to weave together: Carl Jung’s concept of *shadow* and the supernatural in literature. Fortunately for me, my mentor was Dolen Perkins-Valdez and the work which was generated during this semester was some of the most challenging and intense work I have ever done. I applied Jung’s definition of shadow to how a writer characterizes a novel’s characters and asked the question: What does it mean for a character to have a “shadow self” or to be “in touch with her shadow”? In order to explore these “shadowy” motivations, I looked at fiction which featured the supernatural. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* were compared with the more

modern novels, Dolen Perkins-Valdez's *Balm* and Lily King's *Euphoria*. I proposed criteria which would define the shadow narrative and the subsequent "non-resolution" a reader is left with after reading a shadow narrative.

Halfway through my project, I re-read Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. I discovered a new layer of research that involved Morrison's concept of the "dark presence" in literature and was compelled to find out how "othering" dark-skinned characters worked to create a different kind of shadow—the shadow of a culture. Dolen Perkins-Valdez was integral in this process, and the study eventually led me to ask an important question any student of creative writing might ask: To what degree does fiction perpetuate or dismantle a culture's shadow? An equally imperative line of inquiry followed: What replacement paradigm awaits the creators of fiction who wish to evolve out of the duality of lightness and dark? Words will either bind or free; the choice is ultimately up to the person who writes them.

What a mighty responsibility, then, we writers have! To have agency not only to comment on that over-used trope referred to as the "human condition" but to *help create reality* by constructing narratives which do not rely on stereotypes, presumptions or entitled thinking is a power that must be taken very seriously. Traveling through the demands of graduate-level work in addition to honoring the other areas of life such as family and jobs is challenging enough but to consider the sacred power the pen and the pen-holder are imbued with was the point of reference in which I entered my fourth and final semester. After debating whether I could adequately bring to life a Native American character, I was tentative about working on my novel over the course of my program. I set it aside, allowing myself to inherit "beginner's mind" and took full advantage of what

Jaed Coffin referred to as “being a sponge.” He encouraged in-coming students to learn all we could and to resist agendas, i.e. “the novel in your backpack that you showed up here with.” I am so very glad that I heeded this advice although it meant writing new stuff, jettisoning old stuff and re-writing plenty of stuff for the novel pages which are included in this thesis.

After reading a couple of chapters of my novel-in-progress, Dolen asked me, “How do you situate yourself among Southern writers?” When I took an extended pause in response, she asked me a follow-up question: “Or are you just an outsider looking in?” I was cut wide open by the power of her honest question, and realized that I have been an outsider looking in most of my life. From always being the new girl in the aforementioned high schools to turning into an adult who couldn’t stay anywhere for too long (including relationships), I had harnessed many self-limiting ideas about how artists create and had unknowingly placed myself on the sidelines. This belief had wormed its way into my writing and I realized that what Dolen was really asking me was, *When will the safe distance be surrendered?* This query went well beyond the distance of a Southern writer residing in Maine. It was an invitation to dig around the shadowy particulars of my own beliefs and upbringing, to face my father’s racist ways, and to dismantle the modeling I received on how to be a “proper” young woman who had been reared in the South. If I agreed to the expedition, the implication meant I would not be the same after leaving the confining comfort of the past. Giving up safety in writing also meant that I would need to align with my second attention in a way that not only accepted the responsibility to birth my vision into the world but to claim a parcel of that rich dirt that awaited me. No one could tell the stories only I could tell. Whether I was a Mainer

telling a Southern tale or a Southerner telling a Maine tale, I had to leave the trusty sidelines of casual observer for good.

My on-the-side hobby of writing entered its final destination: the fiery furnace of transformation, the last stop on the Initiation Tour. Under the impeccable tutelage of David Anthony Durham, I was ready to face all of the misfit Southern characters inside of me, with their holier-than-thou facades, their alcoholic ancestors who misbehaved, their penchant for hiding family secrets at any cost and their quests for retribution. Drawing on the physical and psychological ghosts of my childhood, I had been reborn into a different kind of Devil's Stomping Ground, my only guide the words, sentences, and paragraphs I chose to either free or silence the many sepulchral voices.

My novel, *Fiddler's Reach*, renders these deliberations into characters, roving narrators, forgotten desires and lost, lonely children who grow up seeking the one thing for which they most yearn: home. The novel's primary story-teller is dead, naturally. Junebug tells her tale from beyond the grave, explaining how she fell in love with the wrong man and how she intends to save her son, the product of that clandestine affair. Abandoning the linear fashion of story-telling I had initially submitted, David encouraged me to play with the front story and back story. This radical invitation led me to discover that other characters were pleading to tell their side of things, too, in their own voices, which led to not only alternate time frames but alternating narration as well. (Michael, Junebug's son, tells his story in first person whereas the chapters of his half-sister, Nora, are told in third person limited to Nora's thoughts).

I have been told that my first-person point of view stories which take place in the South are some of my strongest pieces, whether they be Junebug's tales of snake-biting

great uncles or eleven-year old girls from Kentucky who want nothing more than to save the family dog, as seen in the short story, “Out Shelby.” Another frequently mentioned strength of my fiction is its humor, to which I attribute to growing up in a family of tricksters, joke-tellers, and raconteurs. Every Southerner is a story-teller, and my “refugee” status as a Mainer—as Dolen put it—does not preclude me from the propensity. Having lived in Portland, Maine since 2001, it was a natural step for an observant writer exercising her second attention to try and understand what was happening in the vibrant city’s periphery, namely with its surging homeless population. It is too abstract to allot the city’s ‘homeless population’ as something to manage or allocate funds for; I wanted to give them a face, and humor allowed me to satirize an issue in the story, “Take My Hand.” The other two short stories in my thesis, “A Fortune” and “Look For the Octopus,” attempt to examine why some of us just can’t seem to be satisfied. It is not an accident that the “some of us” in these two stories are women, who I feel are especially yearning in today’s world for a sense of purpose and power. The undercurrent of these stories hints at the other, unspoken, “taboo” yearning of these female characters: the license to make some mistakes and not be cast out of society for them, a privilege easily afforded to their male counterparts.

I began my application for admittance into the Stonecoast writing program with the sentence, “I am a story-teller.” By contrast, I commenced this preface with the words, “I am a writer.” What is the difference, exactly? Not much, really. The story-teller and the writer are both committed to revealing universal truths, exposing injustices, and delivering clever anecdotes to comfort listener and reader alike. But whereas story-telling inherits the practice of the ancient tribes in explaining ‘this happened, then this other

thing happened,' a writer has the power to push the boundaries of reality through the very real tools of words, sentences, paragraphs. As Hampl explains, a writer must puncture the ego-self in order to arrive at her "mythic sensibility," allowing the story its own chimerical luster but also maintaining the wisdom to step back and watch or step in and revise. A writer prepares the experiment of story in the lab of alchemy but knows not the effect on the reader—this blind trust alone would discourage many from the life of a writer. Dues are paid on an on-going basis to the writer's second attention, a skill which no one can truly teach. The need to constantly perfect each passage remains a compulsion that equally gnaws and strengthens the writer's interior.

Who would consciously chose such a path? As the saying goes, "A writer writes." A very old, dear family friend, who was a man of letters himself, told me something about the nature of writing which I hope to never forget. I was wringing my hands about making a living and relaying to him my abhorrence for self-promotion that goes along with the life of any artist in today's world. I resent the cult-of-me and yet acknowledge that there will be competition in anything one claims as a profession. He listened and spoke slowly but directly: "We didn't write to publish a book. We wrote to pull the curtain back on our souls." In remembering this timeless, enlightening *reason* to write, it is my intention to always believe any story I wish to tell holds its own uniqueness, its own power to reflect the world's beauty back to itself. The fortitude I need to carry out this mission can always be found in the words, sentences, and paragraphs.

OUT SHELBY

When Sister made varsity swim team, I started helping mama with all the things Sister used to do: washing dishes, feeding the chickens, even cooking. I'm doing big-girl things but not being treated any different. When I'm old enough to try out for something, I'm not going to mess around with no swimming. I'm going to try for softball. Daddy tells me that I am a "weakling" and grabs my upper arm with his finger and thumb, making them touch. He makes a he-he-he sound that does not sound like his regular laugh and says, "You ever seen an arm that small? Looks about as big as a belt loop." Mama urges him to stop but she gets tickled too and I can't shake him off. So I just stand there and turn red.

"A strong wind might come and scoop you up, land your skinny ass over in Shelby County. You know how to get back home from there? Take the Black Coach Road to where the old train tracks end, then—"

He spends ten minutes laughing his way through the directions from Shelby County to our house. When he finally releases me, I run upstairs and slam the door, not caring that I will be punished for that. We got three rules in this house: No slamming doors, no yelling from room to room and no vacuuming on Sunday. My daddy claims that last one is more for his mama's sake since she is a Presbyterian and they ain't supposed to make noise on Sunday. I ask him how come he hollers at the T.V. when the Saints are on and he says it's only machinery and tools that can't be loud. Then, as if that

reasoning doesn't sound right enough, he adds that he's not a damn Presbyterian (he's a Baptist).

To make up for Sister's work that got loaded on me, Mama takes me out to Jimmy Dale's Smokehouse but I know why we really go there. Don't matter to me. I love the ribs dripping in their orange BBQ sauce and the biscuits with butter. Today, she lets me get a piece of licorice for the ride home. As I suck on it, I think about Victor, our red-bone Bloodhound, who got bit by a snake a couple of days ago and acts like he might die. I stick my tongue out at the passenger's side mirror of the Buick to see how black it is.

"Put that window up. You might catch a bee on there. That'd be cute to get a bee sting on your tongue. Your daddy'd know where we been too and that would be the end of Jimmy Dale's. Go on, put it up."

I close my mouth, run my tongue over my gums for stray pieces of pork meat. "Bees like honey, mama. They don't go for licorice." I say this wishing daddy would find out where we been. I wish he knew how mama looked at Jimmy Dale's manager, Frank Grafton, how she smoothes her skirt about a hundred times while we wait for a table. My black tongue would be the least of our worries then. Daddy'd find out mama was sweet on somebody else and we could leave in the middle of the night. We could float away down the Ohio and never look back. I think about us leaving as I roll the window up, stare at my tongue through the glass. Would we wake Sister up to come with us? I'd hate to leave her there, stuck with daddy. That would be the end of her swimming because she'd have to go back to doing all of her work and mama's, too. She'd have to cook every meal, including breakfast at the crack of dawn's ass. And she'd have to scrub the kitchen

floor and the bathroom floor. She might have to quit school altogether, and never graduate.

“Do me a favor when we get home, okay? I want you to say we been over at Lou’s place, and you fetched Pepper out of the creek and she gave you some licorice for helping. Can you do that? Can you say that’s where we been? But don’t offer it. Say it only if he sees your tongue, you hear me?”

Lou was short for Heloise, our down-the-road neighbor. She was a big, round woman who didn’t have any kids of her own but always had lots of people hanging around her living room. Me and Sister used to get dropped off there in the mornings ‘cause the bus didn’t have a good spot to turn around once it got to our house.

I look at mama then back at the road. “Yeah, I guess so. Why we got to say that part about the dog?”

Mama smokes her Kent cigarette with an Aqualung inhale, flicking the no-ash out the window and gripping the steering wheel with her other hand. “Look at you, Laura Neil. You’re filthy. I can’t believe I let you out of the house dressed like that. Doesn’t look like we been out to eat.”

I think about this logic for the rest of the ride home and wonder how other convoluted stories started out simple in their beginnings. I think about how far she can ride the line of make-believe and still look at him straight-faced. Then blood pricks the inside of my body like the feeling you get when somebody walks across your grave. Does she tell *me* things that aren’t in their original packaging? Stories strung all over her brain like a spider’s web, full of gray tangles, hiding like a book of matches in her pretty Sunday apron or a silver lady-flask in her corduroy pocketbook? I check my tongue one

more time, remembering the taste of the licorice, ready to see Victor. The window fogs where my open mouth fills the space in front of the mirror, and we ride on in silence.

When we get home, I sit with Victor for a bit. He probably got bit when he was out prowling around the back woods that run along the Sawyer's property line, not Lou's creek where I supposedly rescued her dog. Considering the fact that Victor's legs were all wet, I wanted to dry them off before that nasty creek water set in to one of mama's rugs. She never wanted Victor in the house, and held out pretty long then one winter we had a bad ice storm and daddy told me to go get him, even draped one of Granny Nelson's quilts over him when I brought him in. After that, mama let Victor come in even when there wasn't an ice storm but was constantly telling him, "out, out" no matter which room he ended up in. Maybe she just doesn't like dogs.

But back to the snake bite. As I was tussling his legs off, whipping that towel around and around the way I've seen shoe-shine boys do it, he fake-nipped me. I rubbed my arm, checked it (it was fine) and started my inspection. That's how I found it: two tiny fang holes on his left hind leg, right above the knee joint. Victor's a red-bone but has some dark gray spotting like a German short-hair. I might have missed the snake bite had he not snapped at me. There was a chance it was a water moccasin but more likely it was a copperhead. Either way, it was a bite. Wasn't bleeding like a gash, though. I heard someone say the ones that don't bleed are the worst. And isn't it interesting that venom is used to cure stuff? I tried pressing on the two holes but Victor started growling and I backed off.

Daddy said Victor's leg would be okay, that he was a "strong pup." Daddy calls all dogs pups, no matter how old they are. Well, this pup's run-in with the snake happened two days ago and I ain't seen him get off the floor since. Not to go pee, not to eat, nothing. I even waved a shank bone under his nose that mama pulled out of the five-hour stew she made Sunday. He didn't even act like he could smell it—nothing.

Now, seeing him right where we left him in the back hallway when we left for Jimmy Dale's, curled up on the same quilt of Granny Nelson's (it became a dog blanket after the ice storm), I am worried. I fold up a bath towel and make myself a flat pillow and sit down beside him. He groans when I pick up his heavy dog head and position it on my lap. As I stroke his velveteen coat, I think about what mama told me to tell daddy if he asks.

Here's how I think it over: What creek? He says. Out Lou's, I say. Had to get her dog out or that mutt would float all the way to Paducah. He's a sausage, that dog. Daddy'd grunt or ignore me. Do I look that bad, do I smell like creek water to you, daddy? I'd want to say this but I wouldn't. Back-talk is sure to end up in a whipping. It wouldn't matter anyway and I wouldn't have to worry about it because he never asks—she thinks he's going to, and he never does. 'We don't look like we been out to eat.' No, mama, we look like we been sitting in the Buick. You, laughing at every damn word that Frank Grafton says. I had worn my new green sun visor, the one mama bought me at Mack's the last time we went to Jimmy Dale's. It's made of floppy plastic and I was turning it sideways, making all my bushy hair go up one side of my head, trying to entertain myself. I switched it to the other side to see what that looked like, then I flipped the back hair over the front of my head, pretending I was Cousin It. Frank was telling

some tale about a catfish he claimed he caught at Baydin Lake, said it must have been as big around as a hog's neck and as long as the front seat they were sitting on.

I poked my head over the seat. "A catfish? In Baydin Lake?" Everyone knows a catfish's rightful home is the river.

Frank continued to regale mama with the catfish story, describing how long, how heavy and how ugly that catfish was. Mama made like it was the most hilarious thing she'd heard in her whole life, laughing and holding her chest like she was trying to keep her boobs from giggling.

"Oh, Frank, why didn't you serve it up at the restaurant? Make it a special?"

Frank leaned over like he was going to let out a fart but was just reaching for his lighter. He tapped out a cigarette, lit it and rolled the window down half an inch. "You know what. I threw that sonuvabitch back. Freezer's full as it is."

Here's where I wished I'd paid more attention, in retrospect. Mama touched Frank's face, starts tickling his ear like and says something about the one that got away. Talking about it being a pity or something. Then he said, "I know where to find one, if the mood strikes. My fishing pole will always attract the biggest fish in the sea."

Sea? I wasn't supposed to be listening but I had to know where Frank caught that catfish. "I thought you said it was Baydin Lake?" We weren't anywhere near the ocean and I wanted to get this damn story straight.

Frank cut his eyes at me then murmured something about seeing us next time and how he had to go over home to Black Mountain, would probably stay the night. Mama had stopped laughing at this point, and I put my hair back the right way. I think if I hadn't been so determined to get the story about the catfish straightened out, I would

have heard more about what mama had to say to Frank but Frank the old windbag seemed like he was saying the majority of what was needing to be said. He wasn't trying to hide much, really. And I caught this last part clearly.

He got out of the Buick and walked around to her side of the car, leaned down into window. "Got away nothing. I'll see you next week."

Tangled, sticky spider webs. All over her and all over me. And I got to tell daddy about hauling Pepper out of Lou's swampy back yard, how she gave me licorice for it.

I try to think what Victor might eat. I knew we had some chicken and dumplings in the fridge and mama might kill me if she knew I gave them to the dog but this dog is usually a big, strong, howling dog. A bloodhound that don't eat is a sickly one. I try looking at the fang holes but he's lying on that side and I don't dare roll him over. I was about to move his head off my lap and go find the dumplings when Sister comes through the door, home from swim practice.

She bends down and kisses my forehead and gives Victor a scratch behind his ears. She smells like chlorine mixed with the smell of the dryer, like something toasty and fresh. She's as tall as the sunflowers that grow along the side porch, tall as daddy, which I think he probably likes. She's probably two feet taller than I am and although she hauls ass down those lanes, she isn't that beefy. The other girls on the team look a lot more filled out. She got daddy's genes, I guess. Skinny, long-legged, like a praying mantis.

"He move yet?"

"Nope."

“Did mama call the vet?”

Was she crazy? Call the vet? Chlorine gone to her head and start eating on her brain cells? Our mama pay good money to fix this dog up? I don't think so.

“She'd put on a party if Victor up and died from this.”

Sister steps back and looks at me the way everybody was looking at that calf at Olin Griffin's last spring whose front leg got crushed by its mama. “That's why you always need someone 'round the clock at calving season,” daddy had said. Big heifer crushed that calf's leg and Mr. Griffin had to shoot it, said it couldn't walk and would just be one problem after another. That's how Sister was looking at me.

“What? Why you looking at me like that?”

“Laura Neil, I think that's *why* she would have called the vet. You know?”

I finally catch the drift of what she's saying, that Mama wants to put Victor down. Before I know it, I can hear my own heart beat pounding on my head's insides. My palms start to sweat, and I press my hand into Victor's shoulder blade, feeling my wet hand against his warm coat.

“When?”

Sister hangs up her duffle bag on its wooden peg in the hallway, kicks off her sandals. “I shouldn't have told you. Maybe she's changed her mind. Maybe he'll come out of it.”

She walks out, through the kitchen. I hear her run up the stairs followed by her feet slapping against the pine floor to Mama and Daddy's bedroom. She knocks on Mama's door loud and then I hear the door slam shut.

I think about how stupid I've been, spending my time thinking up things I think he'll eat when I need to get him out of here. Chicken and dumplings, Jesus! If it's up to Mama, sure would have been his last meal. No. No way I'm letting a snake take this dog.

That night at supper, I keep real still and quiet. I don't know what all Sister said to Mama when she went flying up the stairs but seems like nobody has much to say. Sister finally says something about coach wanting her to practice on Saturday and Sunday mornings and it only takes Daddy one second to lie his fork down like a doctor with a scalpel, resting it on the side of his plate, real slow like. Does the same with his knife.

Mama looks at him and stops chewing. "Neil, she didn't say she was planning on it." Then she looks over at me for some reason.

Daddy leans back in his chair, looks down at his plate of butter beans and mashed potatoes. Then he looks at Sister. "What'd you tell him?"

Sister keeps right on eating and swallows the bite she's working on and lies her fork and knife down in the same dramatic way daddy had done. She looks at him and says, "I told him any good God-fearing Kentuckians go to church on Sundays."

"That's right!" He scooches closer to the table, picks back up his fork and knife and finishes his supper.

I eye a piece of stringy ham Mama flavored the butterbeans with on Daddy's plate. He moves it around, like he's avoiding it but I know better. He's saving it for Victor. Any minute now, he'll call the dog to the table.

Mama looks at me from under two painted-on eye brows. She takes a long sip from her tea, spits one of the lemon seeds back in the glass. "When you planning on

cleaning out the playroom? I need to bring Ruth our donations. You know you haven't touched some of those games for years."

"I thought you told me I have until Sunday?" I ask, my eyes glued to Daddy's piece of ham.

She crosses her arms and smiles. "They *need* them by Sunday. Why don't you work on it tonight? Get started then you won't feel so rushed this week-end."

"Here boy!"

This is it! Now Daddy will see how sick Victor is! I lean my head over to the right so I can watch him come through the doorway. Sister gets up from the table, takes her plate and mama's plate into the kitchen. Where is he? Come on, come on, Victor! Get up.

Daddy sucks his teeth, wipes his mouth. Sister brings in the ashtray and sets it down in front of him. He pulls the pack from his shirt pocket, lights a cigarette and blows the white smoke up into the ceiling fan.

I bite my lower lip, grip my fork. "Victor ain't doing so good, Daddy. He's been out there for two days. Probably won't even want that piece of meat. You want me to take it to him?"

To my utter surprise, Victor comes loping in. He's favoring that back leg, and his long silky ears are flopping around his wet, goopy eyes. I think I might cry. Daddy drops the piece of ham on the floor and Victor gobbles it up. I try to touch him, grab for his tail, anything. The dog just looks up at Daddy, waiting for more. I stare down at the half a biscuit on my plate but Mama is watching me like a bobcat. My only hope is that Victor may follow me when I go in to take my plate to the kitchen and I can give him the biscuit then.

“I told you he was fine,” Mama says which makes me mad because she never said Victor was going to be fine and according to Sister she was ready to start digging his grave. Mama likes to pretend that she is on the right side of a situation the whole time. And he’s not fine. He’s still limping, and the only thing he ate was that little bit of ham meat. That won’t be enough for a big dog like Victor.

After all the dishes are done, I go out to the playroom and start with the box of Barbies. Mama’s right that I haven’t played with them in a long time but I’m not so sure I want to give them away either. I tell myself I’ll go back to the Barbies and start pulling out games stacked on the shelves. I spent an entire Saturday spelling out all the games with my label maker, sticking plastic labels on the edge of the shelving. They popped off within a week. Daddy said the wood was too porous, whatever that means.

I take down Sorry, Candyland, a box that’s supposed to have Simon in it but all I hear is a couple of batteries rattling around. I start a maybe-pile and an it-can-go-pile and place the Old Maid, Go Fish, and Uno decks in the it-can-go-pile. There’s a box of checkers and I remember playing checkers with Granddaddy Harris. I put them in the maybe-pile then find my magic 8-ball. I remember getting it from Bryant Carter at my second grade birthday party.

I shake it and shake it and ask if Victor will be okay. I look down and wait for the cloudy, greenish water to part. I read the words, “It is Unlikely.” I shake it again and ask the question a new way. Will Victor die from this snake bite? I slowly turn the 8-ball up: “It cannot be Determined.”

Then I think about something I must have thought about earlier in the day but put out of my mind, mostly because I would be the one lying in a grave in the back yard. I go upstairs and knock on Sister's bedroom door.

"Can I ask you something?"

She moves her American History book that looks like it could be a cornerstone for a new house and makes a spot for me to sit. "What's up, Laura Neil?"

I sit on the edge of her bed. I am still holding the 8-ball. I look at her for a minute, trying to find the words. "I was thinking of taking Victor up to Miss Pam's."

Sister closes her notebook and sticks her pencil in the spiral part. "What do you think she can do? He got up tonight and ate that piece of ham. Don't you think he's coming 'round?"

This is a good sign that she doesn't lock me in my room right now. Miss Pam is the root doctor who lives down the way, in the opposite direction of Lou's. She keeps to herself, and some people say she's some kind of witch but I think that's just 'cause she don't go to church.

"She fixed Jenny's grandmama up that one time. You don't remember that? That woman was wasting away to nothing now look at her. Looks like she's been eating on Christmas dinner for three weeks."

"You know daddy will skin you alive if you go up there. How do you even know her? You ever seen her? I haven't. Anyway, that's a good mile and half. Victor can hardly make it from the back hall to the kitchen table. How were you planning on getting him there?"

Daddy would skin me alive. Miss Pam delivered a baby once for a woman who wasn't married to anyone. He said Miss Pam was happy to consort with the devil and for us to never, ever even head in her direction. So Sister is right about that—I would be in big trouble. But the fact that we're still talking and she hasn't tied my hands together or strapped me to a chair makes me think it's not as crazy an idea as I thought.

“Don't you think that venom needs to come out of him?” My voice cracks as it goes up.

Sister looks down at the 8-ball in my hand. “You been asking questions to that thing? Maybe you ought to say a prayer instead.”

I cover up the ball with both hands and stand up. “I ain't scared to go see her. What makes you think Daddy will find out anyway?”

Sister laughs at me and opens her notebook back up. “Oh, I don't know, Laura Neil. The fact that you aren't cleaning out your toys like Mama asked, that the dog ain't lying out there on his bed? Were you planning on going in the cover of night? Or what?”

I don't say nothing but decide this is a good idea. I've snuck out before, know where all the creaks on the stairs are. Daddy wouldn't wake up if a freight train came through the house. And Mama—well, it seems like we got a special arrangement with her trips to see Frank Grafton.

“You want to ask something?” I offer the 8-ball to Sister.

“No. He's going to be fine. Go put those toys together for Mama before she's got to tell you to do it for the fifth time.” Sister pulls her history book onto her lap indicating this conversation is over. I walk downstairs and out to the shed to find the wheelbarrow.

We're ready. Got a clear night and the moon is big and full so I can see good. I know Victor will fit in the wheelbarrow, I'm just not exactly sure how to get him up in it. I wouldn't jump up in no wheelbarrow if I was him. And I damn sure can't pick him up. From the looks of his leg, it's a good thing we're going. It blew up, looks like the bone of a dinosaur or that squash Lou kept showing me every time I stopped by last summer. She said it was hiding behind the cucumber leaves (they're real big) and by time she spotted it, she could hardly break it off. I admit, that thing was bigger than my arm and leg put together.

Victor is confused as to why I have him tied to the back steps. He sits and watches me arrange his quilt in the wheelbarrow. I have fourteen dollars in my front pocket I can give Miss Pam and in my other pocket, some of the chicken from the chicken and dumplings pot. The house is dark and I pray to God it stays that way.

But the dilemma is getting Victor in the wheelbarrow. If I lean it on its handles, the nose of the thing is headed straight up in the sky. If I lean it the other way, it's unsteady the minute I put my foot in it. I crawl up in it anyway and dig around in my pocket for the chicken, which I dangle in his direction. Ah hell I forgot to untie him! But if I untie him, he'll wander off toward the steps then paw the door. He might even bark.

I squeeze the chicken in my hand and unhook him. He smells it and just about takes it from me but I lead him to the wheelbarrow. I situate myself in it and he follows, plants his two big paws in the front. He's sniffing my fingers trying to pry them apart with his big nose. He licks my hand then my face and I try to fight him off, holding the chicken as high as I can but I get a little tickled, which makes him even more determined, like we're playing a game or something. Then the weight of his body makes the

wheelbarrow tilt to one side and I go sliding out of it, Granny Nelson's once-nice quilt comes sliding with me and Victor takes the chicken right out of my hand.

I stand up and watch him lick his chops. He stares at me, then back at the wheelbarrow then back at me as if to say, 'What part of the game is next?' I try to think of another way to get him in that wheelbarrow. Victor is not one of those dogs that would jump up on something because you patted the spot with your hand. No sir. He's as stubborn as any hound I've ever known. They're usually one-person dogs, as in they listen real good to one person and to hell with everybody else. When Daddy hunted more, daddy was that person, Victor's special person. I like to think I am that person now. He tries to sit but remembers his sore hock. Whatever happens, I know I need more chicken.

I tie Victor back to the steps and tiptoe my way through the kitchen and to the fridge. I don't turn on any lights, knowing the fridge light will be enough. The stainless steel pot's sitting there, I pull it out. No much left but the dumplings so I put a few of them in an empty margarine container I find under the sink. When I go to replace the pot lid, it slips out of my fingers and bounces on the counter and keeps falling to the floor. I try to stop it with my leg but it's too late. Victor barks once, twice then he settles into his long signature bay.

I hear movement upstairs. Please, please let it be Sister. Victor is doing the low whoof-whoof sound now but the damage is done. Somebody's up.

"Laura Neil Montgomery, what in the world are you doing up at this hour?"

Mama turns the kitchen light on to find me standing there, her pot of dumplings in front of me. I show her the margarine container. "I was hungry."

She walks over and stares down at the dumplings. “Jesus, child why didn’t you get down a bowl? That there’s the bacon grease tub.”

“I like bacon.”

Even though the night cream has dried, I can still tell where her black eyebrow would normally go because the skin beneath goes shooting up. Victor is still whoofing.

“What the hell are you up to? What’s the dog outside for?”

I know if I tell her ‘I don’t know’ she’ll have a fit. She doesn’t accept ignorance for an excuse plus she knows I know why the dog is outside.

“I thought since his leg blew up, we’d—”

“What’s happened? Is everything alright?” Sister comes padding down the stairs, eyes not wanting to open. Now Victor thinks it’s a good time to alarm the whole county and begins to bay again.

“Go get that dog inside while Laura Neil answers me,” Mama says to Sister but stares at me. I’m wondering if I should start eating the dumplings, since I was supposedly so hungry that I got up in the middle of the night to make myself a snack.

Sister looks at me but doesn’t move. I was never a good liar, my body language always gives it away. I stack one foot on opposite ankle and start swaying. Victor has stopped howling for the time being.

“Laura Neil. Do not make me ask you again.”

I sway and think about the wheelbarrow outside with Granny Nelson’s quilt balled up beside it. I think about the fourteen dollars balled up in my pocket. I think about what Miss Pam might look like, whether she’s got a black patch over her eye or jack-o-lantern teeth, if she has a crystal ball that she’s seeing all of this in right now.

Sister steps between me and Mama. “I told you he was going to be fine.” Then, turning to face Mama, she says, “She wouldn’t listen to me, said she was going to sleep down here beside him tonight. I’ll go get him.”

Hallelujah! That’s good, and I know I will owe Sister big time for that one but I don’t care. It’s worth it. Now will Mama buy it or not? Whoof, whoof.

“Sleep on the floor? With Victor?”

I force myself to stand up straight. “Yes m’am.”

“What’s he doing outside?”

Sister looks at me like she might have another zinger if I can’t think of something. The bacon grease hits me and I stare down at the dumplings, as if they could tell me why Victor is outside. Finally, I say, “He heard something. I let him out so he wouldn’t start barking in here. You know how he is.”

“Well maybe it’s you that’s got him all worked up, down here at two o’clock in the morning fishing around in the soup pot.” Mama picks up the pot lid and rinses it off in the sink.

Sister takes her cue and goes outside to get Victor. I don’t suspect I’ll be so lucky as to have her stick the wheelbarrow under the porch steps. But at least I got all night to figure out that one. Mama’s got that look on her face that says she’s weighing out some probabilities, possibilities but I hold on. I wait, I count the seconds because this kind of stand-off is my specialty. She would never consider Miss Pam.

“I want to you to sleep in your own bed, okay? But I’ll let you bring Victor upstairs. He can sleep on your floor tonight if you’re so worried about him. But I swear to God Laura Neil if I hear one peep, one bark, he’s going to his barrel. You got that?”

My mouth drops open because I am in shock. Sleep with me, in my bedroom? She ain't never let that happen. Even Daddy might not like that idea. "Really? I promise we'll be quiet."

"I know you'll be quiet because you will be asleep, young lady. I didn't say slumber party. Now, if you're hungry, pour yourself a glass of milk. Dumplings floating in bacon grease will sure give you a stomach ache."

Victor and Sister come through the back door. He's limping, then stops, sniffing the air, following the scent of the dumplings, chicken, bacon grease. I don't know if I should throw the dumplings out, put them back in the pot, or what. Mama seems to read my mind because she takes the container and covers it with a napkin then puts it back under the sink.

The four of us climb the stairs, Victor leads the way taking two steps at a time. Nobody says anything. Before mama heads off to their bedroom, I feel an ashamed kind of love for her, which surprises me. I think maybe if she's willing to let the dog sleep in my bedroom, maybe she'll see that he needs help, needs some attention and we can call the vet in the morning. Maybe she's starting to understand that things sometimes just don't get better on their own.

"What about his leg?" I call out, just as she's about to step into her room.

"Go to bed, Laura Neil. We'll talk about it in the morning."

I grab Victor by the collar and walk him into my room, shutting the door behind us. I get in the bed and pat it, hoping he'll jump up on it and sleep with me. But he doesn't. He goes my arm, licks it, and lies down on the floor. I stare up at the ceiling and listen to Victor's breathing. My stomach growls, and I realize I'm hungry.

TAKE MY HAND

The last time I saw my son Harry, he looked like he'd crawled out of Casco Bay. He'd been "looking for his brother" or so he'd said with that crinkled-up wink, which told me he was pulling my leg but I couldn't understand why. The two had been separated at birth after having been spit out at two-minute intervals from their mother, who supposedly didn't "know" she was having twins, sort of like one of those misfit mothers who says she thought she was just "full" and oops, delivered a baby in the bathroom stall at McDonald's. Delores wasn't that screwy back then. She messed up with a lot of stuff but she wasn't a misfit in that sense. She sort of scaled the walls in a misfit sort of cage, scratching and clawing her way through life. She scratched her way into my heart, at least. Anyway, let's just say that the OBGYN appointments were not all that regular? A beastly habit of SoCo on the rocks while she was pregnant with those little runts and a steady stream of mary jane made one of the boys—the one I named Rufus but Delores wanted to name Todd and since she was the mother in this case, had the authority—barely coherent when he crested. Harry, though, who in his triumphant two-minute lead, seemed to already be on a mission to out-drink, out-think and out-demise his mother. Everybody else, for that matter. "Out-demise." That should be a word.

But as I was saying, once separated, something ironical happened: Delores kept Harry and Rufus-Todd got shipped off to Delores's Aunt Cindy who lived with her husband Leo down in Biddeford. They made candles. They were really good people, wholesome-like. And they didn't have any kids of their own. Cindy always had a soft

spot for Delores and an even softer spot for babies. After about seventeen months, Delores demanded that the two boys be reunited. Maybe the guilt kicked up. I didn't really have a say-so because, well, being situated as I was in county prevented that kind of thing. Delores would bring Harry in every once in a while. She usually only came around when she needed cash. Can you believe it? The old broad shows up to jail, asking me for money! But I was pretty flush, as flush as one could be selling Flexeril to opheads. Can't do much in the way of fathering behind bars though and sometimes late at night when I'd hear some jackwagon tossing one off, I'd think 'God, I hope neither one of boys ends up in here.' So anyway, my boys got imprinted in different environments. There's a big difference between a bottle of booze a night and a jar of candle wax. God bless Harry's heart. I guess he was largely ignored, often hungry tucked in with all of Delores' crap in that second-hand stroller, roaming the streets of Portland. Rufus-Todd thrived in the warm safety of Auntie Cindy and Uncle Leo's quiet home. Cindy's laughter at every single thing Rufus-Todd did probably gave him a leg up. Cindy and Leo didn't buy organic this and non-GMO that, couldn't afford it really—they were just good people. All those advocates for the biological mother/child bond never met Aunt Cindy. And Leo was a spitting image of Fitzzy Maddesen, my ninth grade basketball coach.

When I say crawling out of the bay I don't literally mean he came out of the water like a seal or swamp thing or anything like that I just mean he, Harry, hung around the old port. Hey, what can I say? He took after his mother. He could be spied at any number of the seedy establishments on Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Why not Monday or Thursday? Monday was recovery day and Thursday he bowled. Well, he said he was bowling, but didn't realize it was going to cost him each time, so he just

showed up and hoped to sip off someone's beer when it was their turn. He'd grab a bowling bowl off the ball return and stand around the approach area, watching the pins at the other end, then he'd swing his arm back, tossing the ball like he was playing bocci instead of bowling and would always yell yahooie! What the hell is 'yahooie?' Only Harry knew, only he could be sure of the words and the images that went along with that bastard of a word in his head. I didn't get to teach him much of anything, not bowling or skipping a rock on a pond or how to even fix a leaky sink. And I sure as hell didn't teach him yahooie. He was right decent at the bowling, though. Whoever taught him.

But he might as well have crawled out of Casco Bay. Jesus, it was a long ways back to Fernand Street and there were several bars dotting the wharf. Henley's, the Yen Den, Maria's Outpost—which had an Aussie theme and was kind of cool if you went for that sort of kitsch. Harry went for it, and he also got himself thrown out on several occasions. Maria herself threatened him with a .22. When he first starting going there, he flirted with her but she could see through that garden variety of thinly-veiled addiction. And of course she didn't shoot him—we wouldn't have a story if he was dead, now would we?

Thrown out of most of these bars for un-paid bar tabs and every once in a while for harassment, Harry would return to Maria's time and again. College kids would come in hoping not to be carded (they weren't) and if Harry'd had enough whiskeys, he'd hit on them. What makes a man think that inebriation is an attractive trait to possess? The smell alone would seize the ladies right where they were sitting. Then they got a look at him. "Yikes, old man looks a bit deformed," one girl said to her friend on a fateful Friday afternoon. She must have thought he couldn't hear her but he did. She also mistook him

for being “old” but he wasn’t—forty-three isn’t old. But his looks were on this side of medium rare. He had that sunburnt glow about him, with perpetual busted capillaries like red tinsel draped over his nose that every committed alcoholic I’ve ever seen is either dumbly sporting or trying to cover up with make-up. Anyway, he decided to play it up, to act like an imbecile, hawking slurred words at the darlings and then nailed the last of the nails into the coffin of a fine day when he broke into a wild, high-pitched hyena laugh. Could we call that a laugh? Hmm. Another semantic void has struck. It wasn’t a laugh like ha, ha, ha and it wasn’t a shriek—it was a tainted soul release. That’s sure to catch on as soon as out-demise hits the streets. I had his back most days, and would either be wildly entertained by his antics or he’d piss me off being irreverent. (I looked that one up).

But back to Rufus-Todd. He’d gone missing and unlike his brother Harry, the assumption was not that he went into liver failure or went off to the woods to live the life of a hermit—two scenarios that would suit Harry right down to the ground. Rufus-Todd had grown up right and I wished I’d seen more of his growing up instead of just witnessing the after effects. He’d married a sweet, common-looking woman named Tracy. They had two kids, Katie and Ryan. Cute kids, fairly well-behaved. Even had a pit bull but not the kind of lock-jaw pit bull you read about in the paper all the time. She was from the League, was a gentle bitch and her name was Susie. So Rufus-Todd’s disappearance was alarming where if Harry had disappeared, it would be...predictable? Expected. Hmm. Yes, there is no better word here than *expected*.

Rufus-Todd had been at the Inspect Tool & Dye in the pretty part of South Portland, working his second shift as he did every night except Sunday and Monday. It

was a Tuesday, so when the super produced his clock-in time for the police officer, sure as rabbit turds on a leaf, he swiped in. More astonishingly, he swiped out. He had been there, he had worked.

“Would you like to take a look at the surveillance footage? We can make a positive ID to be sure,” the super offered, his bulging eyes flashing at the officer.

“No, that won’t be necessary. Against the law to see surveillance yet. Gotta be forty-eight hours. Since he was last seen.” The cop dug sideways in his ear, a tight fit for his fat pinkie and circled the outside before rolling a dark yellow ball of wax between his fingers. He flicked it, gave the super his card and told him to give him a call if Rufus-Todd showed up for his shift on Thursday.

It had been a full twenty-four hours (not forty-eight, wait for it!) since his shift on Tuesday afternoon. Tracy, who’d been at her mother’s, was unaware that Rufus-Todd had gone missing, so when she listened to the message left by the super, she was dumbfounded. Later, when she called Freddie back, she thought how irresponsible she must have seemed, not knowing that her husband hadn’t come home. “I was at my mom’s” she’d blurted out time and again, interrupting Freddie as he explained that a cop had come by. She was feeling guilty because it just looked bad, and people by God still care about how things “look.” Freddie the super was too stunted to really be the judging kind, didn’t think anything of it. He had a mama, he went to visit her. No biggie. But Rufus-Todd was gone.

As Wednesday rolled into Thursday and Johnnie Law said they could actually start looking for him in an official kind of way, the police officer who had studied Rufus-

Todd's timecard wasn't working Thursday. It was a new fellow named Sonny Cimato and he was young and green and eager if not mildly trigger happy. He hadn't shot anything as of yet but by the look of him, he was breaking little glass bottles in his mind's eye. Royal blue bottles, the kind his grandmother had lined in the hallway bathroom with fake white flowers sprouting out the top, the slightest film of dust around their necks. Smaller items were harder to ping, to take down but in his mind, but he got every last one of them. He had no comprehension how unlike putting a bullet in someone's abdomen was to decimating glass bottles that were no bigger than a bottle of hot sauce. Sonny dreamed about it all the time. He even confessed to me once that he got a little chubby just thinking about squeezing the trigger. Not shooting anyone, just firing his damn gun.

He had nodded several jerking, affirmative nods when Sergeant Winstead assigned him the missing person's case of my son Rufus-Todd McIntyre. He drove his cruiser over to South Portland Thursday afternoon, ready to question the super and see what was on that surveillance cam. He had been given little instruction as to how to investigate this sort of thing, but the case file on his computer showed a clear, colored picture of what Rufus-Todd looked like: 5 feet 8 inches in height, brown hair cut short on the top, longer in the back, brown eyes, medium build. He thought that summed up about every other man walking around Portland. He asked Sarge if there were any distinguishing features?

"He's looks a lot like his brother." Another officer snorted and shook his head. Sonny didn't understand this comment, or why the officer had laughed. Sarge leaned over

his computer, tapped a few strokes, then turned it to face Sonny. “He’s got a twin that we are entirely too familiar with.”

Up popped Harry’s mug. Sonny bent down with his bristling enthusiasm and squinted at the image. My sons had been born twins, no doubt. But the similarities in physical features had faded along the lines of harsh Maine winters, skipped meals and let’s face it, a steady stream of coffee brandy. Sonny clapped his hands together and said thank you to Sarge but didn’t really know why he was thanking him. He had no idea where to look, where to start. He was sure, though, if he could get to Harry that he’d be able to put some good clues together. He’d heard that twins sometimes know what the other is thinking, like telepathy. How very delusional he was. How very disappointing for him.

If there were worse fates than being associated with a healthier, better-looking version of yourself, Harry didn’t know what they were. The morning light peeked out over the bay in swaths of pink, light orange and finally purplish-blue. He took it in, feeling the cool air on the surface of his dried-out eyeballs then leaned his head right over a trash barrel and barfed. Sure he could make it to the soup kitchen for breakfast but he entertained slipping into a booth at Becky’s and ordering something like biscuits and gravy, maybe a fried egg on the side. It was open, stayed open all night. From the looks of the sunrise, it wasn’t that late and he didn’t want to walk all the way up to Cumberland just to wait on the sidewalk for twenty minutes. He pulled a cloudy, battered plastic water bottle from his the pocket of his jean jacket and washed away the puke remnants along his jaw. He poured out a little of the water in his cupped left hand and splashed it through

his hair, which was sandy-colored, having been pelted by the sun's rays practically all summer. The day would come—he knew it was coming fast!—that he'd have to clean up, bathe even if he had any chance of going back to Fernand Street, if he had any chance at all at commandeering some shelter for the up-coming cold months. By shelter I mean some daft woman, also a drunk, who could use the company. If she was out there, Harry'd find her before October.

He looked up then down the wharf, making sure some early morning trash truck wasn't barreling down the street. He knew folks who tried to get hit, tried to get clipped good enough to sue but not so terrible as to be hospitalized. Detox was not worth the Clip & Cash. Harry was never that desperate. He stumbled out to Commercial Street, heading in the direction of Becky's. He touched a fiver in his pocket and figured he could earn the money back by afternoon, possibly more if the tourists were feeling nice, and his belly was stretching itself out, readying his body for the nourishment. He was hungry, yes he was! He might eat again after breakfast but it was unlikely.

And what happens next could only happen in a place where Mr. Stephen King himself makes his home. It'd be a challenge even for him to cook up this cock-eyed mash-up of a plot twist but allow me to trick it out: three times, and you know what they say about the third time being the charm. It was the charm alright, more like the possessed talisman but you get the gist.

Remember our grass-green cop, Sonny? Well, the third time Sonny passed Harry in his cruiser, he knew it was Rufus-Todd's twin. He did a U-ie right in the middle of Commercial Street and pulled up beside a lumbering Harry, which meant Officer Sonny Green Balls Cimato was traveling in the left-hand lane of traffic. He flicked his lights on

and decided to leave the sirens off. “Only engage your vehicle’s sirens while in pursuit,” Sarge had said over and over again at staff meetings. “This town’s got a refined quality to it and every time we blare our sirens, it loses a little of that, okay?” Sarge was one of those people who often ended a declaration with “okay” then question mark, his leadership style possessing as it did the smallest bit of condescension happy to hitch a ride on that two-syllable word. Sonny let the lights twirl, no sirens, and was confounded when hungry Harry kept on walking, the biscuit and gravy extravaganza cementing in his mind.

Sonny could sure tell that this overgrown street urchin was the twin Sarge had warned him about. His cruiser crawled, keeping time with Harry’s pace. His fingers tapped nervously along the edge of his loud speaker. Keeping one eye on the road for on-coming traffic, he finally gave in, unclipped the megaphone and nearly scared Harry right out of his filthy running shoes.

“Sir? May I have a minute of your time?”

Harry, his single-minded hankering for breakfast, had created a Zen-like concentration and he had not noticed the cruiser. He was jostled out of his biscuit fantasy, calculating in seconds that this asshole must have a goddamn warrant. He ducked quickly down Cullen Wharf, where, unfortunately, there weren’t a lot of places to hide, nothing in the way of dumpsters or cars parked overnight from good-little drinkers who may have wanted to avoid a DUI. No, Cullen’s was neatly manicured—as far as wharfs go—and Harry’s abrupt, quickened pace startled some misty-eyed seagulls from their dock pilings, their piercing squawks the perfect soundtrack to both Harry’s fight-or-flight response and Sonny’s do-gooder naivety.

“Hey, mister? Please stop.” What an idiot! This was no way to “stop” Harry. Sonny nearly took out a bike rack with a bike locked to it as his cruiser bucked over the curb and onto the sidewalk in his apparent inability to drive and talk through a megaphone at the same time. Good sense finally reentered him, and he jammed the brakes down, threw it into park and got out of the car.

There were about four seconds of deliberation that wrestled and rolled over his brain, telling him to call for back-up as his rubber-soled brogans bounced over the cement sidewalk. But for what? He didn’t need any back-up. Nothing’s happened yet. There is no “suspect,” no threat of danger. Still, he touched the heavy steel of his weapon and hurried down the wharf, his heart racing within his tight, black uniform shirt.

Harry slid behind a planter and dragged an enormous metal recycling barrel beside it, creating a make-shift hideaway. He was, not to be crude but to be entirely clear, about to shit himself. He could not go to jail, not this summer. Nothing but crazy meth heads and mean coke dealers in the pokey this time of year and he’d rather not have to deal with them. Everybody on the inside is looking for a pal and he couldn’t stand their hollow eyes, their jagged, ruined teeth. He wished he was a beetle, imagining himself crawling up the side of the barrel and getting lost among the old newspapers and stinky lobster roll boats.

Sonny, having not been born that stupid, walked right up to the triangle of Harry, planter, recycling bin. “Sir? Could I talk to you, just for a second? I mean no harm.”

A blast of suspicion seized Harry’s frontal lobe when he heard the words, ‘I mean you no harm.’ Words like that to Harry, being plagued as he was with Johnnie Law Allergies, immediately thought the opposite of that particular sentiment. But here he was,

crouched down like an abused dog, panting like one too. The small granite pebbles of the wharf pierced his worn jeans, driving themselves into his hind quarters like biting fleas.

Sonny offered an outstretched arm and opened palm to Harry, bumping the large recycling bin over to the side with a swivel of his hip. “Hey, take my hand,” he pleaded and Harry, having not uttered a damn word yet, placed his weather-beaten, copper-toned hand in the officer’s.

“I’s just getting out of your way, there. Won’t trying to do no harm myself!” Harry chortled as the two men faced each other and Harry brushed himself off. He had never seen this boy before, a real yougun and still clean-smelling from his first-thing-in-the-morning shower. The fragrance was not sweet nor too manly—something spicy laden with peppermint, sprinkled with the rich smell of good coffee. “Never seen a copper going down the wrong side of the street that slow before.”

For a split second, Sonny felt threatened by this statement and interpreted it as an all-out accusation of doing something wrong, something unfit for an officer of the Portland Police Department but then he thought better of needing to explain himself to a homeless man, one who clearly would like to still be hiding by the recycler.

“You Harry Dupree?” Sonny asked.

Harry nodded yes, would normally retort with one of his smart-ass ‘who wants to know’ but clear as the sun cresting over the bobbing sails behind him, he could read the officer’s name tag: Officer Santino Cimato. A blonde I-talian, whadda ya know Harry thought.

“It’s about your brother, Rufus. Or Todd, whichever you call him. He’s gone missing, hasn’t returned home from work for two days. You seen him?”

Harry scratched at his mismanaged chin whiskers and stared out at the boats, as if his brother might wave to him from one of the yachts. Rufus-Todd gone missing? He hadn't seen his brother for a few months; the last time was at the Memorial Day picnic Uncle Felix threw every year. This year had been a wet one, godforsaken rain fucking up the whole volleyball game, which was one of the reasons both Rufus-Todd and Harry enjoyed going. Kept them from arguing or drinking too much, and added a slice of filial nostalgia in the package of competition. It felt good to Harry to beat somebody at something. Bowling didn't count. Even Rufus-Todd, being the more even-tempered of the two, gloated after the smallest of triumphs. Boys and their embattled pride.

“What's he gone and done now?” Harry surprised himself with this query. He eyed Officer Sonny in all his squeaky-clean threads, the earnest attire of a service worker, all glory and guts, if things came to that. Sucker Pig in a black suit, shiny do-dads jingling all over the place, Harry thought. Harry knew every last one of them wanted to pop their no-longer-a-cap pistol into something, anything, even if it was an errant moose.

As Sonny began to make little notes in his head about Harry's affect—as he was trained to do—his body chemistry finally starting to regulate under the waves of adrenaline. He probably wished he'd doused himself with another splash of aftershave as the stink coming off Harry could be compared to a mix of a forgotten mop bucket, fried onions, and yeast. Harry Dupree was a little too much first thing in the morning, even I know that. Sonny stepped back, re-aligned his tight shoulder blades with the back of his heels, a trick another officer had shown him to “right himself.”

“Have you seen him? Have you seen your brother lately, Mr. Dupree?”

“Seen him? Oh I’ve seen him. Ain’t sure he saw me. He wasn’t exactly, you know, coherent.”

“Where? Can you tell me that?” Sonny tilted his head, peered into Harry’s rheumy eye sockets. Seagulls swooped overhead, their downy wings slapping the breeze.

“I’ll do better than that. I’ll take you there. Long as we don’t ride on the wrong side of the street.” Harry winked at the officer, the rumblings in his stomach stoppered up against a different kind of hunger.

It would have been foolish for Harry to tell the officer, “Fernand Street.” That side of town wasn’t known for Beamers and hand-painted mailboxes, and he didn’t want Johnnie Law formulating scenarios on the drive over. Hell, he doubted rich folk even knew about this neighborhood at all. Only those looking for a trick, a bag, or an oxy were familiar with the dirt lawns, ruled over by yipper dogs and strewn with broken swing sets and garbage bags. Joints were now legal in the city so kids didn’t have to hide marijuana anymore. Arty types regularly lit fat canons walking right down Congress Street, the sweet pungent smell of decent grass swirling around their heads. Better than any shit I had when I was their age. No, you only went over to Fernand Street for certain things.

After they rolled past Rocky Coast Tech, the Boys and Girls Club and finally the Legion, Sonny figured out they were headed to Sub-Zero, the name the PD had christened the area. Why? Because officers were practically guaranteed to yell “Freeze!” if they had the misfortune of finding themselves over there. Misfortune or opportunity, depending on how you look at it.

“Turn in here, right here. Behind that Dodge Neon,” Harry commanded Sonny, his heart thumping with anticipation. The tall, clapboard triplexes weathered from the snow and salt were in need of repairs and a good power washing. Much like the tenants, come to think of it. Harry eyed the second story plate-glass window with its beige curtains, the same pickle barrel loaded with sand sitting to the right of the door. Even from the car, he could see it held a colony of white and tan cigarette butts.

“Your brother in that one?”

“Could be.” Harry knew being escorted by a police officer down Fernand Street was probably a really bad idea so he tugged the brown Orvis cap he’d found by the museum last week tight around his ears. His only inkling of hope rested in the fact that it was still early for most of the people who lived here.

Harry had been thinking about where he’ll go for the winter, whether it would be back to this godforsaken ratty apartment he was now staring at. There were things in 56 Fernand Street that were still his. He thought about going down South, as every free-roaming miscreant does. Got to be better than this rat hole, better than freezing your balls off at Home Again Resource Center, side by side with others like him, on a worn cot that wreaked of cigarette smoke. He wasn’t one hundred percent homeless, he had places he could stay. Although he’d never wished this prowling kind of lifestyle on anyone, he’d inwardly committed himself to perfecting the existence. He was real stubborn like that, always wanting to prove the point. If anyone could, if anyone could make a living on the streets look doable, preferable even, it was my boy Harry. He was proud about stuff like that. Beating the system and all that malarkey, coming out smelling like a rose.

“Wait here.” Harry fingered the door handle and kept his eyes on number three’s door. “I’ll be right back.”

Sonny had let Harry ride up front. The back seat was for criminals, suspects, pickups. This man, Sonny thought, who was saturated to the bone in alcohol and had about eight months of grim on him, seemed legit. Still, he questioned whether Harry ought to go in there alone.

As if Harry could read Sonny’s mind, he said, “If Rufus-Todd is in there, he might know you’re looking for him and high-tale it out the back. He won’t if he sees me. I’m coming right back,” he assured Sonny again.

Sonny watched Harry hurry up to the door. Funny, it didn’t appear that Harry knocked. He can’t just sit there and let the guy trespass. But it seemed like the drunk knew what he was doing. Besides, the twin was either there or he wasn’t.

Harry clicked open the door. He steadied himself along the bannister that jutted out leading to the upstairs and listened. Luckily, the television was blaring so he didn’t need to tiptoe like the dead—only the invisible. He moved down the hallway, stopping short of the room where the television voices were coming from. He peered around the arched doorway, a forgotten and underappreciated design for the present flop-dwellers. He saw a foot, then a plaid blanket. His eyes moved slowly up the body, he saw a face! It was Jimmy Watkins! Could play the guitar like no other but wasted it on busking. He was good—Nashville good. Of all the people Harry could imagine being splayed on the buggy sofa, he was some glad it was Jimmy.

He moved across the scratched pine floor and through the galley kitchen, the linoleum sticky under his sneakers. Please, please be there he thought. The screen door

was tied shut with a piece of frayed brown twine, the kind you might stake tomato plants with. Some things never change, Harry thought. He reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out his switchblade, slicing through the twine with a quick tug.

As he made his way through the overgrown grass and around the chimenea overflowing with charred beer cans and other unidentifiable trash, he realized what jeopardy he was putting himself in. If she wakes up, sees me down here, she'll call the cops. But the cops are already here, going to give me a ride away from here!

He kissed the air in two beats, the way you'd summon a dog. He crept closer, leaning down to peer through the opening of the make-shift doghouse. "Here, girl. Here, Cocoa girl. You in there?"

The jangle of the chain startled Harry as the dog awoke. He instinctively grabbed it and pulled it tight. The lab-mix whoofed once then recognized Harry, more likely by scent than by sight, and started to whine. She jumped up to lick his face but he fell to the ground and on hands and knees he cradled the dog's thick torso, feeling along the edges of her collar. "Shhh, girl, shuuush. I'm here. I'll take you home." He unhooked her from the chain then looped two fingers around her collar and led her to the fence.

The fence was higher than Harry remembered. Although it wasn't much of a drop, if Cocoa squirmed at all or twisted on the way down, she could get hurt. He had no time to waste and nothing to lose. She'd been gone too long. There was no guarantee that she wouldn't run off.

While Harry was lurching about the apartment, Sonny had punched in the numbers on the license plate hanging off the Dodge Neon. The car was registered to a Delores Dupree, who Sonny took to be Rufus-Todd's wife. A new wave of adrenaline

started to bubble. “He’s in there, we found him,” he thought but then why would a missing person be at his own home? An angry mistrust rushed over Sonny and he decided to pull up Harry’s profile to see if his record had any pendings on it since he looked at it down at the station.

The rap sheet on Harry was far from spotless but it wasn’t the worst Sonny’d seen. Minor offenses like driving with a suspended license, some drug charges (pot, before it was okay to have some on you), an assault in 1993 that he served three months for. I should have pulled him off that guy. Neither one of us were in a condition to argue with the bouncer, much less fight him. It was a long time ago, a time I’d be happy to forget completely.

The most interesting thing to Sonny’s darting eyes was the protection order taken out by Delores Dupree on January 18th. Relation to defendant: Mother.

Harry dropped the dog over the fence and once her four paws hit the dirt-grass, she ran off but then came right back, as if she wanted to cheer Harry on. He hustled over the fence in seconds, called her to him and grabbed her collar. They fast-walked to the cruiser. The back door was locked so Harry and Cocoa both jumped in the front seat.

“He’s not there, let’s go,” Harry panted, peering at the second floor window, hoping with all his might that the curtain stayed closed. Cocoa was licking Sonny’s hand, her toenails digging into his thigh.

“What the fuck is this? Did you just steal someone’s dog? Who lives in there, Harry?”

“You might want to ask me on the way. I know where he is. Go! Before they call him to tell him you stopped by, before they let him know we was looking for him!” Harry felt like a bank robber, high on the stupendous balls he’s got.

Sonny tried pushing Cocoa off but she’s a lover, that dog. “I’m not falling for that shit again, and unless this here Dodge Neon just happens to be parked in front of somebody else’s residence, you just violated a protection order. You knew your fucking brother wasn’t in there, didn’t you?”

If there was one thing Harry knew for sure, it was the precise moment in a situation when you show the real you, you open up, you risk the truth of the situation. He knew that when you hit that point, something like a miracle can sometimes happen and you get what you need. Harry had done away with desire long ago, traded that in for real needs. A bourbon and ginger-ale might be a two-dollar Miller Lite draft instead; a young, giggly great-assed college student may be a got-off-work-early hairdresser with a fresh roll of tips in her purse. And as willing as he was to bump up the stakes on this August morning along the banks of Casco Bay, he sure as hell wasn’t planning on kicking a gift-horse in the mouth. No sir.

“Okay. You’re right. My brother wasn’t in there. The dog’s my father’s.”

Sonny gripped the steering wheel and turned his computer screen in Harry’s direction. “I could arrest you right now. If your mother is in there, you just violated a protection order.”

“I heard you the first time. I didn’t hurt her,” Harry said, maneuvering Cocoa onto his lap. “We’ve had our issues.”

“I could cart your ass downtown right now. Smells like you need a detox unit anyway.”

Harry rubbed Cocoa’s ears and peered up at the second floor window. “He could be at my dad’s, you never know.”

Sonny sucked his teeth and swiveled the computer back to its regular spot, threw the cruiser in reverse. “Give me one good reason I should believe you.”

“Isn’t it worth a shot? He may have seen him somewhere, or talked to him.”

Sonny pulled out onto Fernand Street and gunned it to the stop sign. He did wish he could go back to the station with at least one lead. No one needs to know about the dirty, drunk twin.

“Which way?”

“Turn left. When you get over the bridge, go all the way down Broadway.”

“That’s South Portland’s district.”

“So?”

So. That’s how I got my dog back. When Delores threw me out the second time, I couldn’t take the dog. Oh we’d been in and out of other relationships but you do feel a weird bond with a lady you got kids with. I knew I couldn’t take Cocoa, didn’t know where I was headed or where I’d end up. I knew I needed to make quick cash and my method of income was going good until it wasn’t. In the slammer, I wanted to learn how to write, really write. I could read pretty good but the literacy ladies showed up and they started teaching us things. Expressive writing they called it. I felt like I could do something with my time because jail time is different than regular time.

Delores was like a bad penny, showing up again and again. I suppose she feels that way about me too. I hate myself for not cutting ties with her in a nice kind of way. It was always drama with us, mostly in the form of her kicking me out. When Sonny and Harry pulled up in my driveway with the dog pumping her little paws into the front seat of that cruiser, I almost cried. Seven years. I hadn't seen Harry in a few months but I had run into him at Marie's of all places. No surprise there. The apple doesn't fall from the tree, I guess. We had talked a lot about Cocoa, and I'd told him how much I missed her. I got real angry when he said Delores keeps her tied up in the back yard, chained up like she didn't matter to nobody. To anyone. Yes, *anyone* is a better choice here.

I'll bet you're wondering if Rufus-Todd bleed out in some ditch somewhere. He didn't, don't worry. He's just fine now. Had himself a gambling habit nobody seemed to know about and the table was hot. Whoever thought they'd put a casino in Oxford of all places. Wasn't too good for people who live around that area though. They say it's too easy to stop by after work, have a cheap drink and try your luck. Didn't win today? Don't worry, we're open tomorrow. But tomorrow never comes for addicts. Rufus-Todd should have stopped while he was ahead. And he was up, up by several thousand. But tables cool. Poor boy, said he was trying to win enough dough for a factory reconditioned Milwaukee 12-amp Sawzall and maybe have a little left over to buy Tracy a piece of jewelry. You know they got a jewelry store right on site at that casino? Sad, just plain sad.

I wonder where Harry ended up this winter. I haven't heard from him but that's just like him. Rescue my dog, hand deliver her in a police cruiser and then disappear. A free man hardly ever stops roaming.

LOOK FOR THE OCTOPUS

Penelope Richards rushed through the double doors of the auditorium, nearly toppling over the coat drive boxes encroaching the entrance of Jemellany Elementary School. Her cell phone jostled against her face as she peered into the sky and listened to yet another message. It was opening night for *Under The Sea* and she was tracking the parents of the children who were in the production. The children—all twenty-two of them—were due at four o'clock for their final run-through. The show was scheduled for seven-thirty that evening, and every single parent voted on the time and date for opening night, so where were they? Penelope pleaded to have the musical run both Friday and Saturday nights, with a matinee on Sunday but parents were surprised that a school musical would take up the “entire week-end.” In the end, it was billed “One Night Only!” and that night was quickly approaching. Four-fifteen ticked into four-twenty and only Henry Mercer and Louisa Bloecher had arrived. Besides a freakish snow storm the day after Thanksgiving which had dumped over two feet of snow, the weather had been pretty boring. But today, on December 12th, one week before Christmas break, Mother Nature had something else in store that was tossing Penelope into one panic attack after another: a wind storm carrying rain that the custodian, Earl Fitzgerald, was calling a Nor'easter. This weather pattern—whatever it was—was keeping Penelope's shiny, smiling, singing sea creatures from getting to the auditorium on time.

“How can it be a Nor'estaer, Earl? There's no snow,” Penelope yelled at Earl as he tried to secure the enormous purple Styrofoam octopus to the flag pole near the

school's entrance. As the pole was metal, there was no hope of nailing or screwing the octopus in. Earl had discovered some nylon fishing twine—how apropos—in Mrs. Kitter's art supplies. Penelope checked yet another text which read, *Is the show still going on?* as Earl wound the line over and around the octopus's legs. Both of them fought the sideways rain with aggravated grunts and squinted eyes.

“It'll sure be snow if the temps drop anymore,” he called from the third rung of the step-ladder. “That should do her.”

Penelope released the ladder she'd been holding for Earl and fired a text in all caps: *YES*. She fought with her skirt, which was whipping up and over her legs with angry bursts. The wind sliced through her cotton-blend leggings. As she wiped off her cell phone, she noticed another text. It was from Graham Jesper, Kyle's father.

“Oh no you don't, Graham. Kyle is King Neptune,” she growled as she read his text, which said something about traffic being horrendous and a fallen tree.

Apparently, an old Maple had fallen on the roof of the CVS drugstore on Main Street and the rescue crews were blocking the road. Tartelette, New Hampshire was a small village up Evan's Notch, a spitball to its slightly larger neighbor, Bartlett. Main Street was essentially the only street perpendicular to Masonville Road, where Jemellany was located. There was a county road that ran behind the school but to reach it, you'd have to travel minor roads, and you'd need an ATV. Discovering the reason why all but two of the children were late did nothing to relieve her anxiety. They'd been rehearsing for two and a half months but those little cherubs still needed this run-through. Then, the prospect of not performing *at all* hit her—here she was worried about another run-through!

If only those irritating parents had let me schedule a Saturday night performance, she thought. These were supposed to be hardy people, New England stock. She decided to call Graham back to find out how many cars were stalled on Main due to the tree.

“Graham? Is it bad? Are you bringing Kyle? He’s the star of the show, you know.” She walked away from Earl, who was regarding his handiwork and babbling about snow drifts and the Farmer’s Almanac.

“Hello? Yeah, we’re coming. It’s a bit of a shit-show here. Old Suzie’s a big tree, Penny. You gotta understand a town like Tartelette isn’t exactly equipped with a fleet of back hoes. That tree’s over 150 years old. They have no way of, ya know, moving her.”

Her? Old Suzie? Penelope’s ebb and flow of rage and panic looped back over to rage. “Are you telling me a fallen *tree* is going to keep people from coming out, from getting their children here?” She checked her watch. It was now four forty-four. “Even if we miss the run-through, we still have two and half hours to show time. You’re telling me a tree is the culprit?”

Even with all the wind, Graham’s sigh was audible. “It must be hard to comprehend as a newcomer but this tree is part of our community. Old Suzie is our claim to fame, our point-of-interest for all the tourists rambling up through the notch on their way somewhere else. She’s lying across Main Street, Penelope, so you might have to postpone the ocean party.”

Claim to fame? What, did it talk, she wondered? Spit wooden nickels? Penelope held the door open for Earl as he lugged the ladder through the school’s entrance. He was still mumbling about rain, snow and something about the Pats game on Sunday. She ignored him, hanging onto Graham’s words. She could “comprehend” a special old tree

that the community felt akin to, and she could handle her musical—which the children helped write and which she had written the score for—being called “the ocean party.” But Graham’s uppity comment about her being a “newcomer” really chapped her hide.

“Please get Kyle here as quickly as you can.” She clicked off before he could say more. She walked back down the corridor to Henry and Louisa. The two bored children had begun “modeling” all the costumes. Several costumes were in colorful, lumpy piles on the floor. Pieces of the star fish’s glitter speckled the room, which was really just an over-grown closet housing everything from soccer balls to old mimeograph machines.

“Oh, Henry, Louisa, what are you doing? How’d you get them off the rack? I shouldn’t have left you alone.” She picked up the limp starfish’s nylon stockings and searched around for the hanger.

“We’re practicing, Ms. Richards. Aren’t we, Henry?” Louisa, who played one of the water nymphs, stumbled about in the dolphin costume. Henry was marching around with Neptune’s triton, a long periwinkle robe sweeping the floor in his wake.

“I’m looking for fish,” Henry said. “I need supper and I’m looking to catch some fish!” He stomped around the room, beating the trash barrels with the triton. He discovered some of Earl’s janitorial supplies and held up an industrial-sized container of Comet.

“That’s Kyle’s costume, and it doesn’t fit you. Let’s play clean up, shall we?” That newcomer comment was really bothering her. It was the last thing she needed to hear at a time like this. Who did he think he was? Is anyone born here? There’s no hospital in Tartelette. She’d been there since June and it was December—didn’t that make her something more than a newcomer?

She'd been in tough competition for the job with two highly qualified elementary teachers, women whose past teaching experience trumped Penelope's qualifications by miles, her only teaching "position" the student-teaching she'd done in graduate school. Penelope had met the super-star teachers at the initial interview, which was set up like a panel. The principal, Rick Purcell, explained that he wanted to see just how "imaginative" the candidates could be in a collaborative group setting, and presented several scenarios involving both child behavior as well as academic quandaries to puzzle through and solve. Marcia Hanover spoke confidently as to how she might create an atmosphere of inclusivity for a struggling autistic boy. Margaret "Peg" Bairer hopped out of her seat and demanded a dry erase board so she could draw a seating plan which would provide the peer support this imaginary student needed but also give him the "space" that was imperative for the autistic mind. A bit stunned at the speed at which these other seasoned teachers banded together, Penelope felt useless, not so much from exclusion but rather by the sheer force field the two women created. Was this inborn, this eerie teacher know-how? Or did it speak to their experience? Their ease with one another was impressive and unnerving, and she wondered if they knew each other prior to the interview. Penelope thought for sure she'd be cut from the next level of interviews when all she could mutter at that collaborative panel was, "Yes! That's very good." Miraculously, she was offered the job and suspected what won it for her: her ecstatic display when Rick asked how she felt about taking over the annual musical, admitting that Jemellany once had a notorious music director named Martin Lewis who put on a holiday concert that Rick said, "Would bring tears to your eyes." It was his intention to

put Jemellany back on the map but he needed a pioneer in the Arts to take over the music program *and teach*.

“A pioneer? I am nothing if not a pioneer.” She had blurted quickly and with the animation of a cartoon character. But then she’d felt ridiculous as soon as she’d said it. She could feel the judgment rolling down the sour face of the assistant principal, a dodgy past-middle-aged woman with a longish gray bob and sensible leather boots. As the assistant principal, it was Nancy Dyer’s duty to scratch extensive notes while Rick asked all the questions. He was energetic like Penelope, and not much older than she was, relatively new to the school himself. She could feel that he liked her even though they both knew she was not as qualified and did not have the experience Marcia or Peg possessed.

After Penelope claimed she was nothing if not a pioneer, Rick had squinted at her, as if to concentrate, and said, “Tell us about that, Penelope.” Her heart thumped in her chest as she watched Rick steeple his fingers, rocking slightly in his chair. She had a wild flash of a pioneer woman in a gingham dress and a pitchfork, a wily band of Indians trailing behind her over a vast prairie, the soundtrack of *Jaws* playing in the background. What does a pioneer do, how does a pioneer think? The familiar knot of anxiety which had nested inside of her over the course of this excruciating interview process stretched its tendrils, squeezing her stomach lining in contracted movements. Nancy’s inflated lips poked downward, her pen at the ready to scribble down all the ways Penelope was a pioneer.

“Well, I like to dream. Metaphorically speaking, of course. I like to regular dream, too but you know what I mean.”

“Dream? What sorts of dreams do you have for the students?” Rick pressed, tapping the tips of his fingers in their configuration.

“Although I wasn’t living in Tartelette at the time, I know Jemellany was not able to hire the band from the high school to accompany last year’s musical. I forget the name but it was about the lawn ornaments that came to life to save the baseball diamond from being developed?”

“*Big League*,” Nancy said, solemn as a piece of stainless steel.

“Yes, *Big League*. Well, I don’t think we should have to pay the high school. I think it should be more of a collaboration.” Penelope knew this sounded far from dynamic, and could tell by the way Rick was holding his head that he was still waiting for the pioneering part.

She continued. “I thought we could have the Brewster Middle band kids come over once a week and learn the score. They could act as mentors, maybe inspire the elementary children.”

Rick finally smiled but it looked forced, fake. “Inspire them? And I like to call them students, not children, and certainly not kids.”

She blinked back at his flawless, tight skin, licked her lips out of habit and looked down at her hands. She knew she shouldn’t have called them kids but what’s wrong with children? They were six, seven, and eight-year olds. They *were* children. Next, she’d said something that definitely qualified as pioneering, at least to her way of seeing things. But she’d never be able to un-say it, and that would prove to be a most unfortunate travesty.

“Instead of paying some wanna-be Randy Newman in the mid-West the royalties on some musical that was written in the eighties—that has no educational value

whatsoever—we could have the students *collaborate* and write the musical—the songs, the dialogue, everything. And I could write the score. Brewster could help, if they want. Correct me if I’m wrong, but that’s never been done before at Jemellany Elementary, has it? You have to keep re-inventing yourself if you want to reclaim your impeccable reputation left by Mr. Lewis.”

She’d done it. She could tell Rick not only nibbled but chomped at the idea of recovering his ‘impeccable reputation.’ Nancy was furiously writing something down on her legal pad. In Penelope’s memory, the rest was a blur. She knew she’d said something about a pot-luck with all the schools, or was it a pie contest? She assured him she’d be using sweat equity on most of the props and the set but wanted those costumes to sparkle, and needed some funds for that. She droned on about a raffle. Perhaps give away a top-of-the-line snow blower, or what the hell, a snowmobile? It was New Hampshire, after all. It seemed like everyone had a “sled” as they preferred to call them, but who wouldn’t want a new one? That would bring people out to raise a little money and she wanted Rick to not ever regret the day he had listened to her pioneering scheme, the day he took a chance on Ms. Penelope Richards.

Now, she competed with Old Suzie. She had spoken to Rick earlier in the day and he’d offered to go pick up the students whose parents worked until five o’clock, preventing them from getting to the four o’clock call-time. She walked down to his office to see if the offer still stood but she brought Henry and Louisa with her to avoid any more costume capers.

“Hi Penelope, hi Henry, hi Louisa! What a storm! Our first Nor’easter. I was just coming to see you.” Rick held the door open as the trio filed in. While Henry and Louisa

climbed into the two chairs which faced his desk, Penelope stood behind them, her wet hair stuck to the sides of her face like spaghetti.

She placed a hand on each child's head. "Well, although Henry and Louisa are good, they probably can't carry the whole show, can you kids?" she asked stupidly, a feeble attempt to hide her frustration. Then to Rick, "Where are the other children? What's stopping people from walking them here? The town's not that big."

"Walk? In this? Well, that's not the safest idea. Did you hear about Old Suzie? We can't ask people to get out in a Nor'easter and walk here. Besides, they'd be soaked. The costumes would be ruined."

The tree again. As she gauged her response, she felt a pang of hunger and realized she hadn't eaten all day. Her chest start to rise, her lungs filling with hot, even breaths. "The costumes are here, Rick. And this is not a Nor'easter. Have you been talking to Earl? Listen, all I want to do is showcase our hard work. This is our opus, the big night. I've put *a lot* of time and energy into this, Rick."

He crossed his arms, holding on to opposite elbows the way a nervous football coach does from the sidelines. "This is what I was coming to talk to you about, Penelope. I think we're going to have to cancel. If the stars of the show can't get here, how will anyone else who's coming to see it? It's the best thing to do." He rose out of his seat and walked around to where she stood. She thought for a second he might embrace her in a sympathy hug. Instead he began wiping the strands of wet hair away from her face, tucking them back into her headband. This intimate act felt inappropriate and yet sincere and kind, a feeling Penelope realized she was starved for. Her eyes started to well up with

the tears she'd been fighting all afternoon. He palmed the back of her head and pushed it into his shoulder.

“I know it's disappointing. Maybe we can reschedule it?”

She jerked her head away, possibly pulling a tendon in her neck. She searched his eyes through her tears and steadied herself against the back of Henry's chair. “‘Maybe’? You bet your sweet ass we're rescheduling it, and we're rescheduling it for tomorrow night.” She couldn't believe she had just said that, and to her boss, Rick Purcell, the principal of Jemellany Elementary. But how dare he think that *Under The Sea* would be canceled and forgotten, that all of her pioneering effort would be for naught?

“You said a bad word, Ms. Richards,” Louisa announced as she started whacking Henry's arm. “She said ass.”

The phone on Rick's desk buzzed. He leaned over Louisa's head and pressed the intercom button. “Yes, Nancy? Who is it?”

“It's Selectman Hammerstein,” she said, a slap-happiness to her voice.

“Fred? What does he want? Is it about the tree?” Rick shouted to his intercom. Henry pulled at the top of Louisa's dolphin head.

“I'd suspect it's about the tree. The whole town is talking about the tree,” Nancy snorted.

“Take a message, I'll call him right back.” Rick smiled down at the two third graders, then tried wiping away a tear that had escaped Penelope's eye and was running down her cheek. “Well, you three sure are a sight.”

The phone buzzed again. Penelope raked her fingers through her hair, and rubbed her face. She was sorry she'd said ‘ass’ in front of the children, even though she really

didn't see it as a curse word. This time Rick moved around to his side of the desk and picked up the receiver.

"I said I'll call him back. Tomorrow night? A what? Put him on." Rick swayed on his heels, nodding and smirking at Penelope. "Thought you'd be batting down the hatches out at the farm, Fred. Is that right? No way around it, it's a big tree. Yep, we do. Tomorrow night? I see." Rick crinkled up his brow and turned his back to Penelope and the children.

After he hung up, Penelope knew Rick was about to tell her something awful, something that would rip what little fortitude she was holding onto right out of her body.

"What is it Rick? Tell me what he said. Tell me we can use the auditorium tomorrow night," Penelope pleaded, the rising tide of tears forming again in her hazel eyes.

"I'm sorry, Penelope. The selectmen are planning a fundraiser and they want to have it here tomorrow night. It's the only space big enough. Bean supper, a band, the whole bit."

"Fundraiser? For what?"

"For Old Suzie. Fire and rescue can't haul it out, and neither Tartelette nor Bartlett has the equipment to chop her up. They're bringing an arborist from Concord, and have to hire an excavator from Conway."

"Why can't we make *Under the Sea* the entertainment?"

He looked at her like he didn't understand what language she was speaking. Penelope walked around to where Rick stood. She liked Rick, and had always felt they had an amicable, professional relationship. From his earlier overture in an effort to soothe

her, she suspected he would welcome an even friendlier arrangement and she knew she had to make her move. She had to be clear but not so clear that the kids would pick up on anything.

She grabbed his hand and opened it as if she was about to hand him change. She started to make slow, small circles on the inside of his palm with her index finger. “Do you remember how excited you were about *Under the Sea*, how you mandated that the science classes only focus on ocean life for the months leading up to the opening? That was so sweet, Rick.” She cocked her head to the side, a gesture of vulnerability, showing him her carotid, letting him think he could take a bite out of her if he wanted.

“Why don’t you tell Fred he can have the auditorium during the day.”

“I wish I could. We’ve got the high school all-stars in there all day playing basketball.”

“Are we not doing the show, Ms. Richards?” Henry asked.

“I’m hungry and I need to go to the bathroom,” Louisa whined.

Penelope wanted to choke someone—any one of them would do. She shook Rick’s hand free. “Basketball? Who plays basketball in December?” Her phone vibrated. She figured it was another parent asking if the musical was going to be canceled. She ignored it, and demanded more explanation from Rick.

“Look, Penelope. Fred Hammerstein gave this town a face lift a couple of years back when the only thing left to do here to pass the time was winning a couple of bucks off a scratch ticket or getting drunk down at Songbird’s. He’s worked hard to revive our little community by writing grants, can you believe that? A town, having to procure grant money to stay open? Now he’s asking me, the principal of the elementary school, to open

our doors for him and by God I feel like I have to. He says the excavator quoted him seven grand and that was just to get rid of the tree. Said he'd have to assess the CVS when he sees it. This is a real mess. Please understand, Penelope.”

Don't curse, don't cry, don't spit in his face she told herself. “Is there anything scheduled next weekend?”

“School's out on Wednesday, you know that. I'm truly sorry,” Rick said, reaching out to touch her shoulder. “Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to go talk to Nancy.”

As Henry, Louisa, and Penelope headed back down the corridor to their make-shift green room, she checked her phone. The earlier text was from Graham:

Where are you? Nice octopus. One torn off leg, tho.

“Alright you two, get out of those costumes. Henry, King Neptune is here!” She turned to go up front, thinking she'd meet Graham and Kyle at the entrance to the school. She had dated Graham briefly when she moved to town, for all of July and most of August. They met when he stopped to help her change a flat outside Fryeburg. It had been a hellish journey from Saratoga Springs and the flat tire was a fitting dénouement before actually reaching Tartelette. When she and Graham realized they were headed to the same place, he followed close behind her all the way into town, “just in case” he'd said. There was some sort of attraction there, perhaps stemming from loneliness concealed as congeniality, and they ravaged each other's bodies for a while but in the end, Penelope decided Graham was a bit too much of a mountain man for her, that she saw herself with someone who read more books, knew more about good wine (or any wine), would take her to Boston from time to time for a concert. Graham owned his own landscaping company, had been divorced for two years and shared custody of Kyle with

his ex-wife, Lindsey. He was a great father, and she wished she swooned over that trait like most women do. They both knew it wasn't a long-term thing but the switch to just friends was an easy one to make. In fact, they were better friends than they had been lovers.

When she didn't see him or Kyle anywhere near the front of the school, she called. "Where are you?" she asked, staring through the long, glass panel covered in construction-paper snowflakes. She looked out and counted the legs of the octopus. Seven. Graham was right. The rain was pouring in violent sheets and she was surprised the entire thing wasn't shredded yet.

"On the stage. This set is amazing! You've really outdone yourself here, Penelope. Aidan and Violet Sommers are here, did you know that?"

At the sound of Graham's news that another two students had braved the "Nor'ester" and thumbed their nose at miserable old Suzie, Penelope's stomach flip-flopped. They had made it, they had come out because *Under the Sea* was important and they were important. Maybe the determined Yankeeism still bubbled up in a few of the townspeople. She wasn't sorry about this double-whammy with the storm and the tree because she was compelled to tap her own sense of perseverance, taking pride for what she'd done and what she'd accomplished with the kids. If they couldn't perform, she knew how hard everyone had worked. She had proven herself to herself, and although she was struggling with the acceptance of it, it would have to be good enough.

She could see Graham through the small, rectangular glass of the auditorium door. She was still on the phone with him, and as they made visual contact, they both hung up, and she waved to him. She made her way down the aisle as she watched Henry swing

Neptune's triton in Kyle's face, Louisa chase Violet, and Aidan pop his head out through the pirate ship's portholes.

"It's really great! I had no idea you were so talented. Well, that's not exactly true," Graham joked as she approached him. She looked up at him from beside the orchestra pit, her face blotchy, her eyes rimmed red.

"Hey, what's a matter?" Graham asked, squatting down to her level.

Penelope climbed the stairs at stage-right. "We have to cancel. Rick says we can't ask people to come out in this kind of weather and please don't call it a Nor'easter. Plus the traffic, the tree! Everything's ruined! We can't do it tomorrow because,"—she braced herself for the oncoming tears—"because of a bean supper!"

Graham hugged her tight and didn't ask any questions. He held her for several minutes while the chatter of the children clambered up her spine. Earl was calling to them from some dark place in the auditorium.

"Ms. Richards? I got Hannah Benoit and Jacob Alexander here, and Jacob's mother. Says she's going to stay for the whole thing, the practice and the play. That okay?"

Penelope peered out into the darkness, cupping her hand above her eyes to search for Earl. Without seeing him, she called out into the empty seats. "Earl, we have to cancel. "Under the Sea" is canceled."

Graham grabbed Penelope's free hand and pivoted her to him. "Maybe we can do it, Penelope. Let's do it. You're not going to let a little rain and an old maple stop you, are you? You've worked too hard."

"What? What are you talking about? There's over twenty kids in this production—"

“How many of them have lines and how many are just singing back-up?”

Penelope searched his darting blue eyes. “There’s only about nine who have lines. Kyle’s got the biggest part.”

“And he knows his lines backwards and forwards. Now, what do the other ones do?” Graham grabbed her hands and gave them both an enthusiastic squeeze.

She counted who was there, including Hannah and Jacob who were making their way down the center aisle, with Jacob’s mother, Lisabeth Alexander, trailing them. There was Henry and Louisa, Aidan and Violet, Kyle, Hannah and Jacob.

“What about the music? I’m sure Rick’s made the call to Brewster and told them not to send anyone over. But who are we going to perform it *for*, Graham? People are either stuck on Main Street or huddled around a mug of coffee brandy, at home.”

“You don’t need a clarinet to sing! And we’ll do it for ourselves, we’ll do it for whoever shows up. Hell, we’ll do it for Earl!” He pulled her into his wet parka. She found his ferocity rather tantalizing, even if she didn’t think the idea was a good one. He placed his hands on each of her shoulders, a firm grasp which hurt a little. She thought he looked a bit worn out, maybe a little weather-beaten from all the landscaping. But there was something shiny in his eyes, something burning inside of him. This urgency was something she’d never seen in Graham. Was he seeing someone? Newly smitten? Surely she would have heard about that.

He loosened his grip and took one step closer to her. “If you don’t do it tonight, you may not get the chance.”

Graham’s child-like fervor was slowly infecting Penelope much like his general good nature had when she first met him. She could edit down the script, make new copies

in Rick's office. They knew all the songs—music or not. They were kids, and kids love to sing. They didn't need an orchestra to back them up. She could still play her piece on the piano. And Graham was right: if not tonight, when?

“Hi! I know we're late and I am so sorry about that but you should see it out there! Glad it isn't snow, you'd have to cancel this thing tonight,” Lisbeth Alexander crooned as she took a seat in the front row, hanging her dripping pocketbook on the seat beside her.

Graham jumped in place and clapped his hands like a giddy, overgrown leprechaun. “See! I told you. People will still come. Let's figure out what can be cut, what we can do without. Give me a script, I'll play someone's part. I couldn't carry a tune in a paper bag, but I'm game.”

Penelope walked into a wide shaft of spotlight on the stage. “Earl? Could you please go find Mr. Purcell for me? Tell him to come to the auditorium right away.” She turned to Graham. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Of course I do. We have plenty of time.”

Her phone rang. It was Louisa's mom. “Hi, Wendy. Yes, Louisa's fine,” she said, watching the children play king of the mountain on the pirate ship. “Any chance you're able to come down a bit early and bring some snacks? I'm starving. Front entrance. Just look for the octopus.”

A FORTUNE

Gillian folded the letter and slid it back into its envelope. She kept the letter in the side pocket of her purse, between the mints and her tip-reference card. Imogene had only been at BU for a little over a month, and Gillian thought she might have to go see her, as in drive to Boston, when she received the letter. A letter? From Imogene? Was everything alright? Gillian had written her back immediately. She probably gushed or complained in her letter way too much, which must have made Imogene feel pressured to write back. Which she hadn't.

“Mom, have you seen my pass?”

Gillian dropped her purse in a kitchen chair and looked up to see her son Rob rummaging around in the mudroom. “Pass? What pass?”

“My pass to get into the arena after practice. What other kinds of passes do you know of?”

“Why would you need a pass if you're already *at* the ice rink for practice?”

Rob crouched in front of the fridge. He pulled out a container and tossed it on the counter. “Are those the meatballs from the other night? They were killer.”

Gillian couldn't stand the way conversations with her son could loop and circle-back, implode upon themselves, never concluding. In a stunning crescendo, they'd end in a chilly resignation on good days or slammed doors and permanently turned-off phones on bad days. She was as guilty as he was, only he had the frontal-lobe-teenage-brain bullshit to defend his ADD. What was her excuse?

“Did you have lunch?”

“Yeah I ate. You teaching tonight? I was going to see if Kimmy wanted to come over. You know, to study.”

What was this fascination with Kimmy Southers? Gillian could appreciate that teenagers needed to express themselves but all that black kohl Kimmy caked around her eyes yelled tramp to Gillian’s way of thinking. She had never seen her eat, either, which wasn’t completely out of the ordinary for a young woman but Kimmy was praying-mantis thin. As Rob continued to sniff various containers from the fridge, she opened the Tupperware and placed three of the turkey meatballs in a bowl, adding a teaspoon of water before placing them in the microwave. “I am teaching if my clients don’t slide all over their mats.”

“Still leaking out there, huh?” The whirr of the microwave seemed to distort the question, tempering the off-topic nature of the leaky roof.

Gillian looked down at the kitchen floor, nodding to her son’s question, thinking about what excuse she’d offer the handful of women who loyally showed up every Tuesday night for Yin Yoga. It hadn’t rained in days, so she needed to be creative. One of her clients had sweetly brought her some incense called Nag Champa to mask the horrible moldy smell. But she ended up smelling both smells: deteriorating wet wood meets India. Thankfully the tile roof was under warranty, but the damage it was doing to the rest of the building was not covered. The lawyers had told her husband Sal not to touch anything, that any interference in the wake of the damage would hinder their case.

Gillian refused to stop her classes. Dampness, hippie incense and a total feeling of powerlessness had initiated her into her new business.

Later that night, as she brushed her teeth with such aggravation that her head vibrated and her earrings banged wildly against her neck, she thought about telling Sal that she wanted to go see Imogene, alone. But she didn't want to hurt his feelings, and knew he'd want to go see her too. She felt selfish and angry that she had to weigh everyone's feelings together, lumping them in calculated piles like the butcher on Highliner Ave. does the pork chops.

Sal pushed the door of the bathroom open. "Hey. You didn't call. I told you to call if it was a mess."

A thin line of foamy dribble slid down her chin, and she spat out the remnants into the copper basin. "We made do. It was fine," she lied.

"They did warn us. You pay a fortune for some one-of-a-kind roof—whose only purpose is to keep the rain out—and you expect it to do its job. But they did warn us."

"You'd think it would last longer than nine months." She wrapped herself in an oversized flannel robe, too tired to have this conversation again. He followed her, pulling his dress shirt out of his waistband.

"What do you want me to do? Want me to call Charlie?"

Gillian fluffed the pillows on her side of the bed and pulled the feather coverlet down, crawling between its puffiness like a child. Why was it so cold? It was September. She looked at her husband, who wanted to fix this for her, this damn carved slate roof she had let the designer (not the architect—he'd been the practical one) talk her into. Sal was willing to do anything, even call Charlie, a mobster-friend of his who was known for a special kind of justice.

Instead of saying no, again, to the kind of help Charlie was capable of, she said what she wanted. “I’m going to Boston. This week-end. To see Imogene.”

Sal continued to undress, draping his shirt over the hamper (never *in* the hamper), his trousers on the floor, his undershirt on top of the trousers. “We’ll need to reschedule dinner with Frank and Janet. Not complaining there but...”

She pumped the bottle of lotion on the nightstand. “I want to go alone. Just me. You need to be here for Rob. I’m scared he’s going to fuck that Kimmy Southers and then we’ll be making the yoga studio into a nursery.”

Sal chuckled as he worked his way through the covers. He reached out for her narrow hips and pulled her body into his. “I’m going to be a grandpa?” he growled in her ear.

“Stop it! I’m getting lotion all over your head. And do not say that word again.”

“Grandpa,” he said again as he climbed between her, forcing her legs apart.

“Sal, Jesus, the thought of it!” She stifled a laugh as he ignored her fake-frustration. She could imagine being a grandparent, but to Imogene’s child, not Rob’s. She’d squirted too much lotion, and, feeling a bit giddy under her husband’s determination, began rubbing it into his balding head. Swirling the lotion round and round, there was a feeling of soft innocence. But that was the top feeling, the over-doing-it feeling. Underneath there was a feeling of correcting a path, of escape that had nothing to do with going to Boston.

As she fell asleep, she wondered why Sal hadn’t fought her on going to see Imogene. After she’d giggled and groaned and opened like a flower to him, had kissed his mouth with its hot breath, she would not let the thorn of suspicion completely leave

her. He was supposed to insist on coming with her, to see his firstborn, wasn't he? She finally relaxed into the cool cotton of her pillow and dreamed of hitching a ride to Charlottesville, where she'd spent some time after college, from a farmer driving a tractor down the highway. The only seat he could offer her was in the back, between the corn and sweet potatoes.

From Bethesda, it wasn't a bad drive but Gillian decided she'd like to take the train. Was it that it felt cosmopolitan, or helpless? She denied her nervousness around driving in Boston, claiming Bethesda was itself a bustling city full of obnoxious drivers. But Boston was different, more claustrophobic somehow, and BU was stuck in the complicated section of roads, where everything is going one-way and you can find yourself headed off to the Cape pretty easily. She and Sal had done that once, kept taking exit after exit until oops, a sign for Route 3. She wanted to sit on a stained cushion and sip Amtrak coffee. She did not want to read her Kripalu magazine, or her newsletter from the CSA but some rag with shiny, overly made-up "stars" on the cover, their lives too tremendous for them to manage to live. She wanted the slick feel of her Kindle poking out of the top of her bag, the next installment of Aunt Dimity waiting for her, a mystery-thriller series which Rob had actually turned her on to (*must* have been Kimmy). It was her guilty pleasure, and she was ready to get lost in it.

Because she had decided on Tuesday night to go visit Imogene, she didn't call her daughter until Wednesday. When she had to leave a message, she followed that up with a text. Imogene had finally responded by calling her back on Thursday.

“I thought I’d come up and take you out for a shopping day, some lunch, you know, spoil you a bit. You don’t have class on Friday, right?”

“This week-end? Like, you’re on your way?”

Maybe Gillian should have given her more warning. “I will be once daddy gets home to take me to the train station. Where are you, sweetie?” It sounded like traffic in the background and maybe lots of people talking over one another.

“Yah, I’m walking across the bridge.”

“Bridge?”

“Mom, chill. The one that goes across the Charles. From Cambridge. We went over for a rally.”

“Who’s we? A rally? Have you met some Harvard radicals now?”

Gillian laughed the words out but she could feel herself getting a bit motherly about Imogene’s whereabouts. Her daughter had always been a smart kid, got good grades in high school but did not score well on standardized tests and didn’t exactly have street smarts. It had been quite a feat getting her into BU.

“Will you stop shaving your legs and want to transfer to Emerson, too?” Gillian joked, although she knew it was a snarky comment that would not be amusing to Imogene. A ‘rally’? What in God’s name has Imogene gotten herself into she wondered. The background noise cut Imogene’s sentences into stutters and static.

“Are you there, honey? Listen, I’m staying at the Eliot. I don’t want to cramp your style. Just don’t eat lunch. I’ll meet you at the dorm tomorrow at noon. Is that a siren?” She tossed a few more items into her overnight bag, waiting for her daughter to respond but realized they had been cut off. She looked at her phone, then called Sal.

“Are you coming home? I had wanted you to take me to the train.”

“Pulling in the driveway now.”

The train wasn't quite as romantic as she'd imagined. And she hadn't read any trash mags or Aunt Dimity but had fallen asleep instead. What was unsettling was waking up to a woman sitting beside her, how another human being could take a seat this close and it wouldn't wake her up. It was the sound of clicking nails on a keyboard that had worked themselves into a dream she was having. She'd hoped her mouth hadn't dropped wide open in one of those ghoulish hang mouths but the crick in her neck told her she'd been deeply asleep. The white noise lullaby of the train's ventilation system must have made her drowsy. Its warm air shot down on her head, making her hair flit about.

“Did I wake you?” The woman asked without looking up. She continued to type.

“No. Are we already in Boston?” The train was stopped but it did not look like North Station.

“Have a good nap?”

This woman must know Rob, she thought. “I hope I wasn't snoring.” She had no idea why she said this since she had never been known to snore. An asinine courtesy, to apologize for something that was a non-entity. It was such a trait of women: ‘Oh I sure do hope my existence hasn't disrupted your nirvana around typing emails.’

The woman slammed down the lid to her computer, which frightened Gillian's groggy state. “I'm Patricia. Going to the Climate Change Conference?”

Oh fuck fuck fuck! Gillian thought. “Please tell me that is not this week-end.”

The woman's left eyebrow shot way up to her forehead. She looked down at Gillian's eco-bag, yoga pants and batik scarf and had probably pegged her for an environmentalist.

"Excuse me?"

"Oh I didn't mean it like that. I think it's important. I just don't want to fight the crowds, you know. I'm going to see my daughter. She goes to BU."

Patricia smiled. "It's next week-end. Lucky you."

If Gillian added any more desperate words to the air between them, she would cut her own tongue out. The train started to crawl however the air flow had stopped indefinitely and she felt a tinge of nausea. She stared out her window, trying to imagine the studio fully remodeled, sans leaky roof, no 67 dollar-a-piece tile loosening on its chink.

To try and wake up, she took a scorching hot shower in the hotel. She would make sure to bring Imogene all the doodads the room was stocked with: shampoo, conditioner, squares of rosemary and lavender soap, several sleeves of teacakes, and a bevy of chocolates. Well, she might keep the chocolates. She hung one of the towels over the television because she felt like it was an intruder, a big, glass box sucking the energy out of the room, someone she hadn't invited to the party. She had not brought her yoga mat but was feeling like her muscles could use a stretch after the shower. The pain in her neck was still bothering her. She laid the other towel down and cranked the heat, and commenced to do some asanas naked, something she had surprisingly never tried before.

Her phone rang. It was Sal. "Whatcha doing?"

“Naked yoga. Come on over.”

“Wish I could. Hey, what are we doing for Thanksgiving? We going to your mom’s?”

They’d had this conversation a few times. What didn’t he understand about the waiting game she had to play with her mother? Her mother usually had the family come to her sprawling country house in Western Mass however, with the new, rich shoe importer boyfriend, they may be in Florida by then. Or California, China even. She didn’t want to assume, and she knew asking her mother ahead of time would insinuate that they had other, better offers on the table. It was passive-aggressive, she knew this but he played banal little games with his mom too. And why was he calling her in the hotel to discuss?

“Sal, I haven’t heard from her. And we can’t assume they’re going somewhere. Why do you ask?”

“Rob is asking. I think Kimmy wants him to come to her family’s for Thanksgiving.”

Gillian turned the heat down and wrapped the bath towel around her. She started pacing around the room, trying to tamp down the idea that Rob had intentionally waited until she was out of the house to ask Sal if he could spend Thanksgiving with his girlfriend. It irked her that Sal could not see the low-hanging fruit variety that Kimmy was, but decided upon a diplomatic tack.

“Can we all talk about it when I get home? I’ll call mom. Maybe they’ve booked a flight. And I’ll ask Imogene if she minds that her brother will not be around at one of her favorite holidays.”

“Gill.”

“Sal, I want you to know that I really don’t care what we do, or where we go. If we go anywhere. But Rob is not going to spend all day with that girl. Okay?”

They said a few more things about Thanksgiving. He asked how the room was; she asked what he and Rob were doing for dinner. He said he loved her; she said she’d be back Saturday afternoon so they could make Frank and Janet’s if he hadn’t canceled yet.

She said she slept the whole way up. He said to give Imogene a squeeze for him.

In the hotel bar, where Gillian had decided to have dinner, a gentleman was parked two barstools down. He was alternating reading his phone and a newspaper. A tall glass of honey-colored beer sat in front of him, and a place setting. He was dressed in a suit, but she couldn’t tell if it was tailored or not. She pegged him as being in town on business and probably did the Friday-casual thing at his office, wherever that was. Hell, he could live in Bethesda. He was young, maybe twenty-eight or thirty with a military-type buzz cut of brown hair.

Just as she was ordering her dirty Grey Goose martini, two olives, a threesome walked up and stood in front of the empty barstools, looking around like they were waiting for a bus to hurry up and come. The bar was buzzing, and as she clarified “dirty” (not filthy) for the bartender, the ringleader of the threesome asked the gentleman with the phone if he minded moving down.

“Sure, if she doesn’t mind,” he said gesturing to Gillian. She looked up and was able to see his face head-on. He was striking. His cheekbones could not have been any more angled. His eyes were the color of a late-stage lichen growing on granite with a

storm of intensity brewing behind them. The way he had referred to her as “she” instead of “this nice lady” or something of that sort was unnerving, like he’d taken note of her already.

Gillian straightened up, smiled. “Of course not. Please, sit.”

He slid his napkin and cutlery down and the bartender moved his beer. He left the paper on the bar. “How’s it going?”

“Very well, thanks.”

“Busy place, huh?”

“Wicked busy,” she said, testing her Bostonian.

“Wicked,” he said looking around the bar and over into the restaurant. An uncomfortable pause ensued, alerting her that maybe she did mind. Was she feeling disarmed by his good looks? They were seated so tightly now that she felt compelled to at least say a few more niceties.

“What are you drinking?” Stupid, stupid! He’ll think I’m one of those cougars, she thought.

“It’s Fat Tire. From Fort Collins. Why aren’t you drinking?”

“She is,” the bartender said, placing a beguilingly large martini glass down in front of her. “Would you like to see a menu, ma’am?”

“No, thank you. Maybe in a bit,” she said to the bartender. She gingerly picked up the glass, took in the man beside her. “Cheers.”

He turned not only his face but his torso towards her, rearranging his knees so they’d be perpendicularly aligned with her right thigh. “Cheers.”

Holy shit, she thought. This guy is going to hit on me. “I’m here seeing my daughter, Imogene. She goes to BU.”

“Imagine? That’s a cool name.”

“*Imogene*. Do you go to school? Here, in Boston?”

He took a swig from his beer. “I’m actually here for my brother, Tim. For moral support. He’s at Beth Deaconess.”

“I hope everything is alright?” She was too polite to come right out and ask what landed poor brother Tim in the hospital. The way he said ‘moral support’ might mean a suicide attempt.

He cleared his throat. “He had a motorcycle accident. A few months ago. This is like, surgery number five? He was in really bad shape. The first doctor told him he’d never walk again. But that wasn’t true. So here we are.”

“Aren’t you good. Was he in surgery today?”

“He’s going in tomorrow, 6:30. His wife left him about three weeks before he had the accident. It was crazy! She came back for like, you know, a night, thinking he was on death’s door. Bad scene, bad scene,” he trailed, shaking his head.

Gillian’s home theatre of her mind witnessed the motorcycle crashing through four lanes of traffic, metal and glass and blood spraying all over the road. She wondered if Tim was as gorgeous as his brother, and, if he was, if his features were...distorted.

“I’m Gillian.”

“Anthony.”

They clinked glasses again. “Here’s to Tim. I hope everything turns out better than expected.” She smiled, sipped. Delicious vodka.

The bartender returned this time with a burger and fries and set it down in front of Anthony. The burger smelled intoxicating, and was stacked gourmet-high. She had not been exceptionally hungry, but noticed the martini “sip” going directly into her bloodstream. Maybe she needed to eat.

“Mom!” The line of patrons at the bar turned in unison at the high-pitched shriek coming from the front of the room.

Imogene rushed over to Gillian, trailed by another tall, thin, smiley girl. Both looked like they’d been at the gym but not to work out: sweat pants, hair in a ponytails, cheeks flapping with gum, coral lip gloss. At least those clunky, koala bear retreads had gone out of fashion but what was this? Her friend sported cowboy boots with her sweats.

“Hi, Sweetie! Look at you! What are you doing here?” Gillian clumsily hopped off the bar stool to give her daughter a hug.

“You told me where you were staying, remember? This is my friend Ula,” Imogene said, hugging Gillian and tussling her hair, an act of jocularitry she’d started doing over the summer. “And who’s *your* friend?”

“Anthony, nice to meet you.” He stuck out his hand to Imogene. Gillian could have sworn he winked at her. He turned to Ula, greeted her the same way, then turned back to his burger.

“Are you girls hungry? Shall we see if they have a table?” Gillian felt both excited and a little annoyed. She didn’t like surprises, and was planning on having a quiet dinner alone.

“We’ve already eaten, mom. It’s like, nine o’clock.”

“Eight-thirty, actually,” Ula piped in. What was she, like six feet if an inch?

“Okay, well, do you want something to drink?”

“I can move, if you like,” Anthony offered.

“To where? No, no. Don’t think of it. Enjoy your dinner.” Gillian wanted to tell the girls to scram, that she’d see them tomorrow, that Ula was welcome to come along to lunch and shopping. She didn’t know if she should climb back up on the bar stool or continue standing. Maybe they ought to go up to her room if this was going to be a long visit.

“We were just at Hopper Jay’s, and we’re walking right by and Ula was like, ‘Isn’t that where your mom is staying?’ and I was like yeah it is, so we just took a chance, and here you are, at the bar. With Anthony.” Imogene directed the words ‘with Anthony’ over his shoulder. He looked up and grinned at her, his mouth full of bun, pickle, meat.

Gillian smiled a possumesque smile at her daughter, the kind of look that said when I do think up how to respond, it will probably shame you. She really didn’t know what Imogene was insinuating. Yes, here she is, but she wasn’t “with” anyone. She was nice about the rearranging of the bar stools so the trio could sit together and hey, she hadn’t asked this Anthony to sit so close he could count the freckles on her nose but he had. It wasn’t her fault he could charm the birds right out of the trees with his looks. What, was Imogene jealous? Or just being smart? Teenage girls tended to turn into terse little bitches when they were in a group in an attempt to out-cool each other. Or did it have something to do with competition? Jesus, she hoped she and Imogene weren’t entering that phase of their relationship. She *was* still a teenager, she was eighteen years

old. Damn if she was come trotting into the Eliot in powder blue sweat pants and embarrass her mother with some smarmy comment.

“And is that a martini? Aren’t you like a yoga teacher?” Imogene asked as she laughed at her own joke but Ula had the good sense not to. Gillian sat back down and took a long, slow sip from the drink.

“A yoga teacher? Nice.” Anthony was finishing up his burger and swung his body back in the direction of Gillian and the girls. “What are you ladies up to tonight?”

Gillian felt the heat rise through her chest and up her neck. “These two cherubs are going back to the dorm.” She downed the rest of her drink and cranked her head around to Imogene. “Kiss, kiss. I’ll see you tomorrow. I took the train so we’ll have to walk or take a cab. Ula, would you like to come have lunch with us?”

Ula was raking her fingers through her copper-tone pony tail. “Sure. I am, like, so sick of dorm food. Jenny said you were super nice.”

Jenny? A new identity, perhaps, for college? Before Gillian could ask, Imogene said, “I only let Ula call me Jenny. And Matt.”

Now Anthony had to give his review of the situation. “I was going to ask about that. I’ve never heard the name *Imogene* before.”

Gillian wanted to say, ‘It’s from Shakespeare, you idiot’ but kept quiet and searched for the bartender. Not seeing him, she turned back to Imogene. “I love you, now go get some rest and we can talk tomorrow about your new nickname and who Matt is, okay?”

As Imogene and Ula weaved through the crowded tables, Gillian watched the girls and tried to remember a time she was ever that oblivious. Had her mother ever

visited her in New York, the Ritz Carlton would be the only option for accommodations. Maybe the Gramercy. If Gillian had wandered in to “surprise” her wearing sweat pants and cowboy boots, her mother would have been apoplectic. But she wasn’t her mother. And Imogene was not going to grow up to become Gillian. They were all such different women.

She rummaged in her purse for her wallet and as she did, she noticed the letter from Imogene, the one that had gotten her so concerned. She pushed it further down in purse’s sleeve.

“You leaving me? I thought I’d buy you a drink.” Anthony pushed his burger plate out of the way, dabbed his mouth with the napkin before throwing it in the plate.

“I better not.”

“Have you eaten dinner?” Anthony asked, switching like musical scales from flirt to nurturer. How old was he? How young was he? She couldn’t tell. Did it matter?

She had imagined a glass of wine in the room, Aunt Dimity, and a big bed all to herself. No husband, no teenager, no leaky roof or ruined yoga studio. She wanted hallowed, expensive comfort, and she did not want to think too much about anyone but herself. But she was still thinking of herself. It wouldn’t hurt to have Mr. Green Eyes here to chat with as she had her dinner.

“That burger looked good.”

“Delicious,” Anthony said, finishing the last of his beer.

“Maybe I’ll have a look at the menu,” she said as she pulled the barstool out once again. The bartender cleared Anthony’s plate and stood in front of him, looking expectant. “What’ll it be, folks?”

Gillian looked at the different types of burgers: blue cheese and bacon, guacamole and fire-roasted peppers, grilled onions and mushrooms. “What kind did you have, Anthony?”

“It’s nice to see a woman eat more than a salad every once in a while.” Then, to the bartender, “Could you put Gillian’s meal on my room?”

The bartender tapped the computer screen behind him. He scanned the blue and gray bubbles of tabs. “What room, Tony?”

Anthony looked at Gillian. “3-0-2.”

Gillian’s stomach flipped as she stared back at Anthony, then a less familiar quiver arose between her legs, warming her sides. “I’ll have the fire-roasted one,” she said to the bartender. “And could you make me another martini? That last one was just perfect.”

JUNEBUG

1962-

The Ballroom

History is a roving graveyard that won't stay put no matter how hard you try to pin it down. We who are dead know this. We who are dead still need a reasonable version of the truth, and will take a good-enough account, the type of story that circles around for a few centuries before it "rests" in peace, like people think the dead do. There must be all sorts of reasons why the living hold onto memories long enough for them to be told, to somebody. Doesn't matter who hears, or if it is believed. Later, those memories can burst apart, as is their due. To the dead mind, the telling, not the bursting, is the final act, their final duty. I can rely on forgetting after I say what I need to say, do what I need to do. I can come apart and finally drift off to my forever home, wherever that is.

A long line of murderers.

When my grandmother Patrice would tell me and Benji that we were from a long line of murderers, Mama would swat our legs with a dish towel, try to shoo us out of the room. It was one of several reasons why Mama dreaded going to visit her mother, or Mama Trecee, as she was called. My grandmother refused to be called granny or grandma and wasn't crazy about the name Patrice so "Trecee" was born. I'd overheard a few people call her "Tricksie," which she seemed to get a kick out of. Mama couldn't stop Mama Trecee from carrying on about the long line of murderous kinfolk, especially

if we were all out in a row of cotton. We'd drive down from North Carolina to Monroe, Louisiana every summer to help Mama Trecee and Granddaddy Brennan with the crop. Pinching off fuzzy blossom after fuzzy blossom gets to be a bit tiresome and, at the time, my six-year old ears were happy for the entertainment of Mama Trecee's stories. When she'd throw her head back, close her blue eyes ringed with a comet's tail and put an extra "O" in *long*, Mama would set her jaw and watch us to see if we were paying attention but she never did tell Mama Trecee not to talk. Southern women do not talk back to their mamas and they sure as hell don't tell them to shut up. I reckon Mama didn't want us scarred for life, and she was earnest in trying to protect us but there's no way for a storyteller to hush, no way of stopping a tale that's got family secrets wrapped around it.

It wasn't until I was about maybe fourteen that Mama finally gave me her version of the infamous long line of murderers. And it only turned out to be one murderer, or rather one *incident*. Freddie "Snake Eyes" Beaumont was one of five Beaumont brothers who roamed Northern and Southern Louisiana in the early 1900's stealing horses, delivering spirits by the jugfull and lifting skirts in every hamlet. The "Snake Eyes" in his name referred not to a gambling superiority but rather the fact that Freddie could snatch up a snake with his bare hands and bite its head off, which seems like an unsavory trait to be known. You know how most people feel about snakes and, well, it established him as somebody not to be messed with. Initially a dare, he did it for money; the snakes were no more than little green garter snakes. But then, more money was flashed in his greedy face the day a man brought out a copperhead. Well, the meaner the snake, the harder biting off its head became. Biting it anywhere was a feat in and of itself and earned Freddie a good deal of money not to mention a reputation and his nom de plume. After a while, it was

simply the thrill. Years of getting bitten altered Freddie's chemistry and he became immune to venom. They said he could pass out face down in a mud puddle, not move all night then pop up with the rising sun and play you a song on his banjo. My daddy used to say his brain wasn't wired right for surely there were better ways to line your pockets. Great Uncle Freddie was bound for infamy, snake-biting aside. In addition to harboring a zeal for mutilating reptiles, he loved music. Blues, gospel, hillbilly—you name it, he loved it. I wonder if that's where I got it from.

And I guess you could say it was music that got him in trouble. There was a burned-out barn down near Nacka-tish that a farmer just left to fall down on itself but a few coloreds decided to unofficially set up a private club inside where they could play music. Mama Trecee used to say the only kind of people who can really play what they call the country blues is colored people, and despite the fact that old Snake Eyes was as white as a gardenia blossom, he came across this roadside establishment one night when he was making a jug run. The men behind the guitars could not have been happier to see some of that clear-running, fast-working white lightning show up and Freddie made himself some friends right quick. He didn't care if all they wanted was his liquor; all he wanted was their music so they got along alright. It became a frequent haunt. He would, on occasion, sit in with his banjo, that is if he was sober enough to play it.

The night of the incident, the one that would end his good time and musical appreciation at the roadside barn, was a sweltering August night in 1915. To hear Mama Trecee tell it, he would have been better off going all the way to New Orleans for music, would have been a safer bet. This is a kind of a joke because New Orleans has never been known for its safe environs. When Snake Eyes found himself wrapped six ways to

Sunday in the blue haze of that falling-down barn, the evidence of Beaumont hooch was in every corner: dark brown, earthen-ware jugs. No telling how much he and the patrons had gone through. My great uncle didn't have a chance in hell the night he witnessed something he couldn't un-witness, and it was truly a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

He was dressed in his usual dark pants and white oxford, a straw hat made of sweetgrass covering his black, curly hair. Not one for regular haircuts or any kind of grooming for that matter, the white oxford was blotted with sweat stains around the armpits. The place was filled with cigarette smoke which was convenient for Freddie since he probably smelled like the ass of a mule. He sat sipping on a bottle, openly displaying it on the turned-over barrel, which meant he was happy to share it with anybody who came along.

Across the room sat a Mr. Johnnie Kenyon, a colored man who owned his own land and was raising his son by himself, as his wife had died of an infection in her private parts. Mama Trecee likened Johnnie Kenyon to a great warrior of ancient Egypt, his burgundy-tinged skin smooth with dew, his deep-set eyes glassy with mystery and apprehension. He did not wear a hat, as many of the men back then did. He played a mouth harp which he would, on occasion, put completely in his mouth and play that way. He could hold a C for a full five minutes and before that five minutes was up, at least one lady in the crowd would be wiping away a tear. He also carried around a fiddle that looked like it'd come through on the ark but nobody ever saw him play it. There was something wise and centered about the way he moved, a purpose behind everything he did. Even the quick strike of his match would turn a head or two from across the room.

Mr. Johnnie Kenyon, being a farming widower as he was, had a different woman on his arm or sitting in his lap frequently and by frequently I mean every other week. But on the night that Freddie “Snake Eyes” Beaumont could not un-see what he’d seen, Johnnie Kenyon was with a woman named Flora Lee Perkins, a curvaceous and tawny-skinned woman from Florida. She was a drop-dead beauty, the type of woman who quieted a room the moment she stepped into it. The other women in tight dresses suddenly stood a little taller, moved their straps further off their shoulders when Flora Lee walked in. And the men tried hard not to stare. After they let her sing, well, all the men wanted her. But she’d come in the club that night with Johnnie, and as any man might be, Johnnie was feeling a little possessive of Miss Flora Lee.

Despite the fact that Freddie was well-received and even well-loved, he was not one of them. He was a white man with strong liquor who seemed not to have a family and who ate live snakes. So when he watched Johnnie Kenyon pull his Colt .45 from its home-made shoulder holster, balance the gun along the lip of one of those over-turned barrel tables and shoot a man named Davis Turner, my great Uncle Freddie did the most natural thing any man in his inebriated stupor would do: he tore out of there, jumped on a horse that wasn’t his (since his wagon that was hauling moonshine would have slowed him down), and took off. There may have been a flash of reason or empathy which flickered inside of him that wanted to rush over to the bleeding man or even to Mr. Johnnie Kenyon and ask him why in the world had he shot Davis. But he knew his intervention wasn’t going to put the crimson pool of blood back in Davis’s head. And he knew why Johnnie shot him. Davis had a reputation for being a real charmer with the

ladies and his eyes hadn't left Miss Flora for one second since she and Johnnie walked in that night.

Freddie "Snake Eyes" Beaumont didn't kill anyone that night, but he was the most likely suspect. Rumors flew and before anyone could be entirely sure of what did or did not happen that night, the shooting got hung on Uncle Freddie. Everyone said he had been the one who shot Davis Turner. Why else did he trample over chairs and legs and bottles trying to get the hell out of the juke joint? Freddie must have known how tenuous his friendship with the colored community was; maybe he figured they were protecting one of their own since his kind had been beating down and stringing up their kind for centuries. Or perhaps they knew Johnnie would be tried and convicted without a thought, and they'd seen enough of the way the South does "convictions." Maybe Freddie knew they didn't give a damn about him, whether he lived or died, that they had tolerated him anyway.

When Freddie emerged from his loyal go-to girl Jeannine's place in Lafayette, he couldn't believe the hubbub hadn't died down. To his utter shock, it had reached colossal proportions. Did the white cronies in Freddie's circle know he caroused in that particular juke joint on the outskirts of Nacka-tish? Yes, they did. Some discouraged it; others, like his little sister Trecee, who was in awe of her brother considering all the snake triumphs, did not see what the problem was. Was it because they were black? She was rarely without a colored woman as a child of tenant farmers, a group who came in all shapes, sizes and colors, poverty being the sole tie that bound them.

Blues itself was a way to tell a story, and I tried writing a song about Freddie and the fateful night but ended up penning one about Johnnie Kenyon, who I believe made

out much worse, in the end. According to Mama Trecee, Uncle Freddie was headed to Texas and then Mexico but one of his brothers, the one they called Red due to his shock of blazing orange hair, caught up with him just as he was about to cross the Sabine River. Red's mode of persuasion was not entirely clear according to Mama Trecee. Said Red told his brother that he had a duty to defend the Beaumont name, which was kind of comical since the Beaumonts were about as far as you could get from a Blueblood. Defend what, exactly? And this was just a front—Red didn't care about the Beaumont name. He was more concerned that a black man had accused his baby brother of a crime that he didn't commit, and by concerned, I mean that mossy brick of cold rage left over from the war, the senseless "right" to retribution that breaks the good hearts of just about every man I've known, living or dead, in the South.

They filled Snake Eyes full of whiskey—not the hooch their Beaumont blood had gotten accustomed to. No, they gave him good Kentucky bourbon and walked him out to Johnnie Kenyon's place. A Beaumont brother stood at every window, two on the front porch by the door. They blasted the windows open and went blazing in and before Johnnie Kenyon could grab the same Colt .45 off his nightstand that killed Davis, they shot him in his bed. Was it Freddie's gun that blasted the gaping hole in Mr. Kenyon's stomach? Freddie hadn't actually fired his single-barrel shotgun since his father taught him how to hunt squirrels as a boy. Freddie did fire it, maybe into the rafters but the gun went off. All the other brothers, Frank, Louie, Dodge, Clem and of course Red, had fired theirs too.

And that's what Mama Trecee meant when she would tell us that we were from a long line of murderers. Five bigoted, drunk Beaumont brothers needed to take out one

Egyptian lion. Now Mama Trecee never told the story in exactly the same way, and she never told us that all five Beaumonts ambushed Johnnie Kenyon in his bed. It won't surprise you then that she would also alternate the murdering weapon and the murderous brother. It was Louie with a club then it was sneaky Dodge with a butcher knife. One picking season when it was hotter than the hinges of hades, she must have commandeered a particularly strong batch of liquor because that time it was a noose that big Clem strung up his victim with along the branch of a red oak. By the end of the summer, it went back to being a club but now it was Freddie, and—for reasons only known to her—she kept referring to the club as a harness. My brother Benji had the type of brain that remembered each and every detail, summer after summer, as they were precisely told and it irritated him that Mama Trecee changed things around so much.

I was always more than willing to be swept up in the newest version of full-moon madness, exploding Christmas geese, or how my great uncle they called Snake Eyes earned his money by biting off the heads of snakes but the long line of murderers did bother me. Since she told us so many versions of how Johnnie Kenyon died, I eventually just dismissed them all, agreeing with Mama that Mama Trecee was touched in the head. She was a hell of a storyteller, though. Could tell you about bull frogs sitting on a log and it would be the most riveting thing you'd ever heard. That bullfrog would have a bullfrog family, hoecakes on a tiny campfire and a lonesome song he liked to sing within the first five minutes if my Mama Trecee was telling it. See, a storyteller gets a great joy from spinning the yarn, and couldn't possibly remember all the flavoring she'd sprinkled in the last time she told it. There must always be room for new details. Having told a story ten

times or a hundred, it will never be the same. Not much harm in it, and nobody seems to mind.

By the time I turned ten, we went from working her cotton fields outside Monroe to picking tobacco leaves in ours in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. Mama was overjoyed not to go down there, exhausting herself trying to protect us from the long line of murderers. If Mama's ambushing version is correct, then it may or may not have been Snake Eyes' gun that took out Mr. Kenyon. It could have been Dodge's or Red's, Clem's or Louie's. But Mama Trecee wouldn't have herself a Beaumont legend if she'd ever told us about the ambush. Anyone could see five against one is not right. The long line of murderers in her mind was a way to tell the truth and *not* to tell the truth. It seems sad to me now, that my Mama was so ashamed of Mama Trecee. But Mama Trecee was simply doing what she did best—constructing a world, slapping a few bright colors on for the purposes of entertainment, making her dead live again.

Anybody who is willing to listen to a good story knows it doesn't matter if what you are listening to is the *whole* truth. Sometimes, it's more than the truth you're liable to hear. I only tell you all this family history because my life was the payment for Johnnie Kenyon's, more than fifty years later. I, Adeliene "Junebug" Peppiatte, daughter of Louise Cretia Beaumont Peppiatte and Roland Emmanuel Peppiatte, was murdered. Not in the same way as Johnnie or Davis but from the same reckless, tangled-up desperation of protecting the family name. Pride is one of the seven deadly sins, and can be defined as a love of one's own excellence. What killed Davis Turner was a mix of two sins—

jealousy and lust—but it was surely pride that took Johnnie Kenyon’s life, and it was pride that took mine.

Reckoning. An eye-for-an-eye. Depending on what century you’re in, you may call it karma. The sin of family pride will be carried like a curse until the scales balance out again. See, families—blood, kinfolk—come down to Earth in little bubbles. Think of a family as the same suit in a deck of cards. A lethal crime committed in one generation will be paid out in another, the expression of that crime wiggling its way to the world again. I had a bull’s eye on my back from the Beaumont brothers, and I carried it all the way to 1962. Since the Beaumont debt is paid, I could have left this here Ballroom, could have passed on to the next place but I have a son there.

His name is Michael.

And he is mine.

He didn’t ask for the life he’s led, and he does not carry a curse or deserve the pain he’s gone through. He could have had a good life but I was taken away from him too soon.

Listen closely, because this gets complicated. The marked, generational sins to be paid out come in certain packaging—imagine the card suit-family traveling on a big raft that floats into the world. On this raft, there are determining factors that act like henchmen surrounding the original crime. They follow the family and play out in the next incarnation that the sin pursues. In me and Johnnie Kenyon’s case, the predominant determining factors were the secrecy, confusion and mysterious circumstance in which we left the world. Johnnie killed Davis, no doubt about it. Maybe the folks in Johnnie’s circle were too scared to accuse him or fess up to what they saw. Or maybe it was a tight-

knit community protecting their own. Won't be the first time fear's kept somebody from revealing the truth. Either way, my great Uncle Freddie was innocent in regards to Davis Turner. Then, he ran, which made him look guilty and didn't help the already complex situation. That was compounded by all the Beaumont brothers stalking up to Johnnie's house and killing him in the cover of darkness. No one knows for sure just whose bullet killed Johnnie. In my case, my murderer didn't mean to kill me. The blow which struck my head in that soft spot that is tenderer than the inside of a rose was not intended to be a lethal blow. Benji found me, cold and gray, and thought I'd had a stroke or something because there wasn't any blood around. Then he saw the purple lines of bruises around my wrists and noticed my arm was hanging at a funny angle. Even though he knew I was dead, he bundled me up in an old wool blanket, put me in the Chrysler to go to Nash General, big, crocodile tears streaming down his face as he put the car in reverse. He had to lie to Mama and Daddy about the beating because they likely would have figured out who had done it, the determining factor of secrecy carrying out its claim on the situation.

It wasn't my intention to be dead before Michael could hardly say five words, and so I suppose I must talk to him now, must talk for him—for the sake of what there is left to do. I can only do so much from here, in the Ballroom. It's not light and a tunnel—forget what you've heard. And no relatives came rushing out, singing “On Jordan's Stormy Banks” either. It's 2008 on Earth, and I've been here a hell of a lot longer than I was ever there, where you all are and where Michael is and where Benji is. But not Mama and not Daddy. Daddy worked himself to death and died of a heart attack in his

beloved tobacco plants. Mama held on, died of old age and a broken-in-half spirit. She and Daddy are buried right on our property, or what used to be our property.

If someone asked me why I've set out to do what I plan on doing, I would tell them that my baby is alone, that he doesn't have a mama. I'd tell them he could not survive without me, that he's just a little baby boy who needs someone to care for him until he learns how to care for himself. I would, of course, catch myself and realize he's no longer a baby, that he's a grown man now. Time works differently here in the Ballroom. The past is a ratty, patchwork quilt of complicated patterns here. The bottom line is that Michael, the man or the baby, would never know me, will never know me. He would never know my face or my voice or even my slap of discipline against his pale chubby legs. He'd never eat my fried okra or pop the top of my bread-n-butter pickles me and Mama used to can every fall. He'd never hear me sing, never ride down the road with me in Daddy's Buick, us singing together to a tune on the radio. The day he turned eighteen, an old feller in a biker bar had to buy him his first legal drink.

I've caught myself wanting Michael here with me. But I can't wish for that, can't make that an honest appeal because that would mean he'd have to die to get here. He's already thought of that more than once in his life, the first time when he was about fifteen. It may be crass to say, but I am surprised Michael never went through with the suicide he's contemplated so often. The drive to know where he came from, who his real parents are, must have kept him from it. God knows the need to find out *who you belong to* trumps just about every other desire. No longer a drive, he now sees it as a way to latch on to his suffering, dig his heels in to the loss. He had a good start, though, after the state took him away from Mama and Daddy. Leigh-Anne Bennett was a professional foster

mother, if there was such a thing. A prayer I never even knew I sent out was answered in her taking a special liking to Michael. She wanted to adopt him but she wasn't married. The state of North Carolina mandated that adoptable children deserved a chance to be "placed in a stable household," where there was a father and a mother. She lived up in High Point and kept him for a right long time—almost five years, just two months shy of his eighth birthday. She told him when he was about five that his real mother had given him up for adoption through an agency in Virginia, never told him he actually lived with his real mother for the first two years of his life! Of course, she didn't know that herself. The state moved him to another foster family under whose care was meant to be superior to Leigh-Anne's since they were a married couple. Nothing could have been further from the truth. When the social worker reported the cigarette burns dotting the edge of Michael's ribcage, he was taken from there and put into another foster home. A devout couple in Greensboro named Garret and Lucy Richardson finally adopted him when he was twelve. They had adopted thirteen children before Michael. The good hearts of the Richardsons were fortified by their ultra-religious background. They thought it was their Christian duty to take in the lost sheep. Michael was too strong-willed for their "mission" and became extremely defiant. He ran away when he was sixteen. They didn't do much to try and find him, left everything to the authorities. He never went back. But he did keep their name, Richardson.

When he hitch-hiked down to the bus station in downtown Greensboro, the only place he had on his mind to go was Virginia—the place where I gave birth to him, a story Leigh-Anne had shared with him. After the director of a teen center in Winchester was probing a little too much for his liking, he left and went back to North Carolina. He ended

up in Raleigh, started living on the streets, always cautious about giving out his real name or age. He was tall and had facial hair early and eventually got an under-the-table job where the boss-man didn't ask a whole lot of questions. He was also smart, quick-witted and could charm the birds right out of the trees not to mention had his daddy's good looks, which helped get him out of tough situations. He did all sorts of things to stopper the black hole of loneliness: joined the service (Army-hated it), ran off to Mexico (got arrested and while in the cell, became quite ill from an infection his body was fighting), moved to Hawaii on drug money (thinking paradise might soothe something inside of him). It was there that he discovered the ocean, fell in love with surfing and "experienced" with boys but decided that paradise came with too big a price tag. He soon found another paradise: Malibu. It was in California that he was arrested for the second time, selling a little reefer. It was 1984 and he was twenty-two years old.

When he got out, he moved to the Outer Banks. That's when he met Paige and I thought maybe I could leave the Ballroom, that my prayers had been answered. But his relationship with Paige was never meant to last, just teach him about real love. God bless her heart! To weather his moods, his depression, to sit and listen to all of his stories about growing up and the escapades he'd had. She had some of her own, still does. I send her special protection whenever I can.

After they split up for the final time, I started experimenting with breaking through because I knew Michael would be liable to take his own life. He got into a different kind of trouble but we won't talk about that now. It was around this time that I found out how to break through, and Benji turned out to be my testing ground.

After he retired in 1991 from painting, Benji bought a fishing boat, and moved to Myrtle Beach with his second wife, Nancy. Now if the fish were biting, he'd be out all morning but if he didn't get out early enough or the weather was real bad, he'd stay home. He'd tinker on something in the morning then settle in front of the television to watch the afternoon soaps. My brother, hooked on whether Victor and Nikki were going to get married or plan each other's murder. I wouldn't believe it had I not seen it from the Ballroom.

About twenty minutes after the last bite of his ham sandwich hit his stomach, he would start to doze. The show played on, not disturbing his hard-working snores one bit. He was probably catching up on all the years of lost sleep. Dozing is the best opportunity to visit the living because it's considered an in-between place. Not fully awake but not passed out asleep either. You can weasel into the body and the soul at the same time. It's a half-in, half-out kind of place, not unlike the place I'm in now, come to think of it.

He'd lounge in his brown Lazy-Boy, his little dog, Peanut by his side. Damn dog never begged that sandwich, just lied there in between Benji's skinny thigh and the arm of the recliner. I pressed down on my brother as he began to snore, alerting him to my presence. Dreams can be extraordinarily vivid in those first few moments of twilight sleeping, and as I stated before it's easy to get through. From the Ballroom, I could reconstitute all sorts of things we shared together—a fishing trip with Daddy, playing Spit on the kitchen table to all hours of the night, laughing on the front porch at something little Tina said, a cold bottle of beer in our hands. He'd wake with a jolt, a smile would creep over his face and he'd watch the T.V. for a few minutes until he fell back asleep again. After I'd secured my route into his dreamscape, I started pulling up all

the bad stuff I could think of: the morning he found me after I'd died, Mama's screeching terror as the social worker pulled Michael from her arms, the day he himself watched the life of Maggie slip away as he held her hand. I even got good at pulling up things from Michael's life I'd watched from the Ballroom, times he'd wake up in a cold sweat from a nightmare or calling out for Leigh-Anne. Or the time he almost drown at Atlantic Beach, too drunk to float much less swim. He should have never stepped foot in that ocean. This was hard for me because I'd already seen all these things once and I didn't need to see them again but I thought maybe if Benji saw it, maybe he'd be compelled to find Michael.

Unfortunately, my plan did not work. No matter if it was a half-starved teenage Michael shivering in a train depot at thirteen years old or getting bounced around in the back of a Paddy wagon at seventeen, scenes of his nephew suffering never caused Benji the guilt I was shooting for to make him go look for Michael. He'd just sit there, blinking himself awake. He'd absent-mindedly scratch Peanut's head and say under his breath, 'What the hell' or 'I'll be damned.'

He never did anything with my re-memories. He never tried finding Michael. I know he had his reasons, and I do understand why he worked so hard to leave the past where it belongs—in the past. But this was my son, the only thing in the world that meant more to me than my music. I finally came to accept getting taken away from him. Folks who don't die well don't stay in the ground, become ghosts. I didn't want that and can do more good from here. I'd thought about sprouting up in Michael's dreams, but did not know if that wouldn't be too hard on him, make him even sadder than he was. Plus, I'd likely want to stay down there with him if I allowed myself to get that close. Michael

never seemed sturdy enough to handle it so I never tried with him. But I would not accept the fact that there were Peppiattes and even Beaumonts in the world who didn't even know he existed, or, if they knew he existed they didn't know where he was or how he was living. Some ignored it altogether and others, like Mama, wrapped herself up in the grief of losing me and never forgot my son. She always prayed for him, asking God to put good people in his path. I couldn't handle watching my son yearn for something that I knew he could find.

A new opportunity has presented itself to me. I may not have been able to provoke Benji but there's someone else. In addition to Beaumonts and Peppiattes, Michael has Macalister blood in him. He has kin in the world.

Michael's daddy, Duke Macalister, was married when I met him. He even gave me my stage name, Junebug, since I was born on the first of June. I didn't plan on falling in love with a married man—who does? His wife's name was Lizzie, still is because I think she refuses to die. Three years after I died, Lizzie finally got pregnant with a little girl. Nora Elaine Macalister was born in September of 1965, and three years after that, her little sister, Shannon Elizabeth Macalister was born in October of 1968. Nora and Shannon were the apples of their daddy's eye, beautiful girls who had every opportunity, every privilege a Macalister is due. They were smart too, went to college to escape the flat, hot environs of Eastern North Carolina. They lived all over the place, just like Michael, but by very different means. Both are married, and Shannon has four children! Just like my mama had. She lives in Denver and her husband makes loads of money,

which I suppose is nice if that's what makes you happy. Unlike Mama, Shannon had a nanny to help with the raising of those four children.

Nora moved back to North Carolina from New York after her husband Alex took a job in a lab at the college in Wilmington, where they do testing on the ocean water. But Nora is childless, and here is where I see my opportunity. She is a bright girl but she worries a lot. She over-thinks. Because she had an abortion in college, she thinks she's being punished for it by not being able to get pregnant. And she's no spring chicken, is scared her body is revolting, that her biological clock sort of fell off the wall. She has lately been looking at adoption brochures, which is a little ironic since it is my intention for her to find an orphan, my Michael.

I've tried to get through to these girls before. I started with the younger one, Shannon. Although she has a higher psychic opening, she was having none of me. I'd learned, from trying to wrestle Benji out of his afternoon naps, that I could punch a hole through the veil, showing what I've seen, who I am and what I know through dreams. But penetrating Shannon's dreams was kind of a joke since she was so exhausted every night from those four babies, nanny or no. So I tried Nora, who I found out right quick is not a good sleeper and has made her mind a type of fortress. There was once when she and Alex were living in a barn outside of Asheville. They were young and broke and wanted to fix the old barn up and sell it for big bucks. While they worked on it, they slept there. That old place had spirits embedded in every grain of wood, lurching from every rafter so I knew it was "open." I tried my damndest but could not get through to her then.

But now is different. With her worrying about whether she is ever going to have a baby, she's filled herself with What-If scenarios, which work to destabilize a person.

She's even started to worry that Alex will leave her if she doesn't get pregnant soon. She's weak and operating from fear and so I know it won't be long now. I'm getting close, and have worn her out through all the dreams she's been having of me. She thinks they're *hers*, and she's seen scads and scads of doctors about her "nightmares." I have to wear her down and I have to keep making her see what I see, remember my memories for me.

My opening gets bigger as she struggles more. Now you might think that's taking advantage of someone's suffering, that her break-down is my break-through and I guess you'd be right. But the same yearning she has to make her nightmares go away is the same desire Michael's suffered all his life trying to find out where he came from, who his people really are. Don't you know those girls would want to meet their brother, if they knew they had one? Don't you think they'd want to find him? I have to believe they would want to know.

I don't feel too bad for Nora. She was lucky enough to have both mother and father give her everything she needed growing up and I'm real sorry about the baby business but I didn't plan on leaving mine motherless.

I hate to take advantage but she's my only hope. She wants something she can't quite get her hands on—a baby to call her own, a little doll to dress up and feed and wash in the kitchen sink.

A child to love. To call her own.

There's a third element I must explain because this is the good part. I call it the Silver Lining, and it's the opposite of the wall of deception, opposite of all those

determining factors. The Silver Lining in Johnnie Kenyon's case was that his son, Nigel, was staying with Johnnie's mother the night Johnnie was blasted into smithereens. She lived in town, and there had been a traveling gospel group singing in the town square followed by a fish fry. It had been a late night and was too much for the old woman to get Nigel back to his daddy's house in the dark. When the news came, both grandmother and grandson were told that Johnnie fell into the river and drown.

The story of my Silver Lining is still being written. My Silver Lining is that Nora will find Michael. He deserves to know some family, even a half-sister. He needs to lay eyes on the faces of his kin, to know one person of blood.

Let me tell you right now: I am no angel. I did some things in my life that took me miles away from God's grace. I readily admit it, and regularly burn myself up trying to unhinge myself from the regret. I'm not telling you a Mama Trecee tale, and I'm not saying all this stuff so I can repaint my life in a prettier shade. Not at all. I don't even need to set the record straight, am not out to ruin the memory of Duke that his girls hold or tell them what he did to me.

I only want my son to be happy, to be free. Michael's done something now that was worse than going through with suicide: he's given up, is broken inside. Nora must find him, but she's got to get to Benji first. And Beni is holding on, waiting to unload this burden, to tell the tale he's kept buried all these years.

NORA

March 18th, 2008

Wilmington, North Carolina

22 Memorial Drive. The wipers slapped the rain away as Nora blinked up at the plastic, commercial marquee. The buttercup-yellow, curlicue lettering read ‘Gateway Plaza’ so she knew she was in the right spot. She checked the store names again: Jenny Craig, Chipotle, Stanley’s Barber Shop, HomeGoods, Kleen-n-Neat Laundry World. Joseph C. Redfern had told Nora the office was a bit hard to find; she wanted to say, ‘Buddy, I lived in New York—I think I can handle Wilmington, North Carolina.’ He had told her she needed to go through the florist, that there were a few storage spaces located in the hallway behind the stores that the money-grubbing landlord had turned into rental space. It was cheap, and close to a retail location where he sold pottery. Now, as she thought about just driving back home and forgetting she’d ever made the appointment, she wondered if he’d meant HomeGoods?

She drove the length of the storefronts and parked in front of the barber shop, deciding that if anyone knew where the florist was, it was Stanley the Barber. She hesitated to ask where to find Joseph C. Redfern, Shamanic Practitioner, Dream Interpreter, Psychopomp, and Purveyor of Fine Pueblo Pottery, as his card indicated. Nora was still unsure about going to see a “non-traditional” healer; if she announced it to the world, then that meant she’d have to accept it herself. She had not even told her husband about the appointment, and if things did not go well, she didn’t plan on telling

him. She had been leaning way too much on Alex, and was determined not to call him today. Not until this appointment was over and she could figure out if this Redfern fellow was legit or not. She tucked his card into the Volvo's ashtray, which was factory-clean, and hurried into the barbershop.

A bell on the door of the barber shop jingled as she opened it, announcing her presence. A white-haired man with glasses sat in a barber chair, buttoned up to his neck in a cream-colored smock. The lone barber stood behind him, clipping away, clearly in the middle of some very important story. A middle-aged man and boy of about four sat in a row of hard-looking chairs against the wall. The boy glared at Nora as she entered and when she smiled at him, he buried his face in the man's lap. The man continued to scroll through his cell phone, occasionally tapping the screen.

As she dripped a semi-circle of rain water onto a flat, dingy doormat, Nora realized she had never actually stepped foot in a barber shop. A sign above the soda machine listed the various services, which included a straight-razor shave and something called a holiday wax. The vending machine was nothing more than a dispenser crammed with salted peanuts, ten cents for a "heaping handful." A talk show host raising hell on some unseen radio completed the lapsed scene, taking her back to an earlier time.

"Excuse me?" She took half-step off the mat. The barber still did not look her way but she'd broken the trance of the man with the cell phone, whose blatant once-over made Nora feel small and out-of-place, like she was there to beg for change. The barber continued to spin his tale to the obliging customer. Nora made out a few words over the evangelical intonations of the radio host: *docket, take a stand, way beyond negotiation, city council*. Local politics must trump all other topics of discussion at Stanley's, she

thought.

Finally, the customer beat the smock off his lap to free his hand and pointed at Nora. The barber stopped talking, wiped his comb along his vest and looked over to Nora.

“Morning. How can I help you, miss?”

“Is there a florist in this plaza?”

“Sure is. Go in where it says Jenny Craig. They ain’t changed the sign yet.” His tone was nasally, like the tobacco auctioneers she’d heard as a child. He turned his back and picked up the electric trimmer. Nora thanked him but her words were lost over the trimmer’s buzz.

Fearing she was already late, she left her car where it was parked and rushed down the walkway, passing several vacant storefronts before coming to the Jenny Craig sign. Sure enough, a bouquet of asters, poppies, and zinnias flared out of a silver can which sat in the window.

A young woman with bleached blonde hair was standing behind a high counter, stripping thorns from a long-stem rose. Nora heard another woman talking but did not see anyone else, then the woman popped up from a refrigeration unit, where she was re-arranging buckets of flowers. Nora assumed that must have been where the Jenny Craig perishables had been showcased. The air swam with honeysuckle, rose, and soil—a much more welcoming scent than the medicinal tang of Stanley’s.

“Hey there. And how might I help you this dreary day? Need some flowers to brighten yourself up, I’ll bet.” The young woman stripping the roses did not look up from her steady task. She’d pronounced ‘flowers’ like ‘flyers’ and somehow made it one

syllable.

Nora had not missed a lot of things about the South while living in Rhinebeck but she had missed the good-natured ease strangers took to greet one another, Stanley the barber notwithstanding. She'd lived in many places and North Carolinians seemed especially congenial when talking to someone they didn't know. Her father, Duke Macalister, had been steeped in a propriety she had never been a fan of, but she did appreciate the infamous hospitality her Southern roots were known for.

“You looking for Joe-Joe?” The woman by the cooler called out as she stood, taking some effort to steady herself from her crouched position.

“Joseph Redfern? He told me I would have to walk through the florist. Please tell me this is the place.”

“Come on. I'll even escort you.” The woman had bushy brown hair that stuck out from a calico kerchief, the kind Nora's grandmother would have worn. She led her through a series of stacked milk crates full of bud vases and piles of Styrofoam wreath molds. They reached an archway covered by a thin, purple tapestry embroidered with elephants walking through a maze.

“You must be Nora.” Joseph Redfern walked toward the pair of women from the other end of the hallway and offered an outstretched hand of greeting. Nora immediately remembered his blue, husky-dog eyes as she took his hand. He could have passed for one of her father's uncles, or any neighborhood man with a shovel in his hands, was scrawny and had a weathered face. There were silver patches in his unkempt beard. Because of the beard, it was hard to tell how old he was. His black, thinning hair was streaked with white and was pulled back into a stubby ponytail. He donned cowboy boots and faded jeans

which worked to deliver the picture of cool-casual and Nora was suddenly self-conscious about her own wet look. Since losing so much weight, she was often cold and wanted only cotton against her skin, which required many layers of clothes to achieve the warmth she craved.

“Mr. Redfern, I hope I’m not late. You probably don’t remember meeting me at the Broadturn flea market last October? I was curious about the book you were reading and you gave me a mini-lesson on Nietzsche.”

“Of course I don’t remember,” he chuckled. “You know how many people I talk to out there? A lot! Most of them want to talk about the damn casino. Come on in, let’s get acquainted.”

Redfern led Nora further down the hall to an open door. A soothing, spicy-scented incense hung in the air and she could see the gray remnants of smoke lingering in thin lines. She took her shoes off at the entrance, as Redfern had done. The office was surprisingly homey, considering where it was located. Hundreds of books lined the walls. All except one. On the far wall, a floor-to-ceiling stained-glass window beamed with light. It was a beautiful nautilus: colors of salmon, white, and black swirled against a few striations of violet. Nora stood and stared at the mammoth glass, calculating the probability of sunlight coming through the panes—simply impossible, considering they were standing in essentially a remodeled storage room. Redfern watched her in silence. He walked over to the panel at the base of the glass. He flipped a switch, and the light went out. He turned it back on, and the mesmerizing nautilus returned.

She walked over and touched the glass. It was warm on her fingertips. “It looks so real. It really looks like sunlight.”

“I know. I had to do something. You should have seen it before. They must have been butchering pigs in here or something. Disgusting!” He touched the spiral in the middle of the glass. “I picked it up outside of Roanoke on one of my wife’s antiquing trips. She’d begged me for it, then I decided it had to come here. She did too, once she saw the place.”

Nora looked down to where Redfern had flipped the switch, and tried it herself. “Hmnh.” She smiled at Redfern and sat down on a puffy, leather couch.

“Find the place okay?” Redfern asked as he got settled into a matching overstuffed chair across from her. Nora started to laugh. At first it was an innocent, little-girl giggle but then the giggle turned into something delirious, something resonating throughout her chest cavity. She realized as the tears sprouted in the corners of her eyes that she wasn’t laughing at the absurdity of the question but rather feeling the relief. Relief of not having to hide anymore, as this man in front of her was her last resort. Her last chance. She had no other options after him. She felt something break inside of her as she leaned her head back against the sofa.

“It’s not that bad! I know the whole strip mall thing is a bit, what? Kitschy?”

She shook as the tears streamed down her face, her green eyes silhouetted with dark circles. She reached in her bag and pulled out a packet of tissues—an item she never left home without these days. Doubling up a couple of them, she blew her nose hard. She wiped her eyes as Redfern waited, easing himself into his chair.

“It’s not that I couldn’t find it, well, I couldn’t but that’s not it. I’m a mess, Mr. Redfern.”

“Well, I can see that.”

She took a deep breath. She hadn't removed her raincoat and was horrified that she'd sat on his couch in it. She slid her arms out, and Redfern took it from her and hung it over the side of the couch.

“Dreams. I've been having dreams now for about a year that are very disturbing. They all center around the same woman. Her name is Junebug and she does these horrible things. Rips her face into shreds, screams non-stop, bites her own arm, fists. I don't know her—I mean I've never seen her before in my life. There's usually a snake, too. Most times, it's a python. But sometimes it's this much smaller, yellow snake.”

Redfern fished out a small note pad and pencil from his shirt pocket and flipped it open. He scratched something down. “Does Junebug ever harm you?”

“No. Sometimes, when I'm watching her do things from a distance I feel like I am making her...do them. Almost like a puppet, and, it's strange to describe but it feels like I am her. I'm clearly me, Nora Armstrong. But in the dream I'm not me inside. It's hard to explain.” Nora tried concentrating on her breath, a technique Dr. McCardle taught her to quell the anxiety which usually bubbled up whenever she talked about the dreams.

“And you don't know her? Does she remind of you of anyone? Your mother, perhaps?”

Nora's eyebrows arched up and her heart began to pound. “Mr. Redfern, pardon me for saying what I am about to say but I have spent many months plowing through the study of inter-personal family relations and this is not about mommy, daddy or my presumed emotional scarring from either one of them. Frankly, if this is your approach I think we just need to say good-bye right now.” Nora reached for her raincoat and began smoothing it out, touching the resistant beads of rainwater.

“I know Freud, and he’s dead. Okay? We’re not going to do psychoanalysis,
Nora. How long did you say you’ve been dreaming about her?”

Nora crossed and re-crossed her legs. “It’s been about a year. Since we moved to
Wilmington, actually.”

Redfern jotted something down on his pad. “How old is your house?”

“It’s fairly new. We live in Windward Oaks. Why?”

He scratched the back of his left hand with the eraser of the pencil and gazed
down at it. He tossed both on the table in front of them. “Because if you’d said that you
live over on Grace or Chestnut Street then I might think your house is haunted and the
old maid who died in it wants it be her house again. Or, she might want the old owners
back—who knows. Generally speaking, newer construction isn’t as appealing to spirits.
Unless someone committed suicide there.”

Nora reared up and squinted at Joseph Redfern. “Suicide? Spirits? Are you saying
I’m being haunted, through my dreams, like Freddie Kruger?”

Redfern continued, ignoring her question. “But new houses can be haunted, too.
You may just need a clearing.”

“A clearing?”

“That’s what the word psychopomp means. I help stubborn spirits move on, out of
the material plane. Now, some are lost or confused—don’t know they’re dead. But some
can be ornery-like.”

“Mr. Redfern, I thought ghosts topple vases over and shatter picture frames. And
why isn’t Alex having bad dreams? If an ‘old maid’ died in our house, why does she need
my sleeping hours to play her little tricks?”

“I don’t know. But dreamtime is a portal. Might be the only way of making herself known. Excuse me for a moment.” He walked over to a section of the bookshelf with built-in drawers, opening several before he found what he was looking for. He pulled out a plastic bag with a brown, bark-like substance in it. He returned to his seat, tossing the baggie on the table.

“What’s that? It looks like twigs.”

“It will help you sleep. It’s a tea. Let it steep for three or four minutes. No longer.”

“What’s it taste like?”

Redfern grinned and scratched his beard. “Smells like shit. Tastes like sleep.”

Nora picked up the bag and could only imagine what sort of roots the dark brown sticks were. As she contemplated Redfern’s words, she was torn between the absurdity of the idea and actually getting to the bottom of what might be happening to her. She’d only seen one dead person—her father—and the waxy make-up on his face was clownish, his dark blue suit deflated where there should have been muscle, definition. She believed there was a higher order at work, and she hoped it was benevolent. She was raised Baptist, and had grown up going to church every Sunday. But she didn’t think much about the ‘other side,’ wasn’t entirely sold on good people going to heaven and bad people going to hell. If it was a ghost, then it had nothing to do *with her* at all. All of the specialists who were frustrated with her inability to respond to the gamut of treatments, pills, and therapy could now rest-assured it was not their delinquent methods or lack of knowledge that left her a suffering insomniac. And she could finally be free from their implications that she’d repressed some horrendous memory, or that she was losing her

mind.

Redfern continued. “Do you know if anyone has ever died in the house?”

“I have no idea. Aren’t realtors supposed to tell you stuff like that?” Nora began twisting a plug of hair at the nape of her neck, a nervous habit she’d picked up since the dreams started.

“No, I don’t believe they’re obliged. Could be wrong. I’ve slept in the same bed for the last fifty years. Been a long time since I’ve been in the market for a new house.”

Nora envisioned Redfern and his wife cuddled up together in a bed too small for both of them, the wind howling through cracks made by years of settling and weather. She thought about how ridiculous this ghost theory would sound to her scientist-husband. She’d mentioned natural healers before to her husband, even showed him Redfern’s card she’d picked up at the flea market. He’d smirked and cradled her face in his hands, saying ‘Has it come to that, Nora?’

Nora leaned forward and returned the baggie to the table. “What do you have to do to get rid of it, the ghost?”

“If it is a trapped spirit, it really depends on how bad it wants to stay. How long do you have before you need to be somewhere else?”

Redfern sat with each of his hands on the chair’s arms. He appeared relaxed, confident. Not concerned at all about spirits taking up with human folk. Nora guessed this sounded like a textbook haunting, that it was an everyday occurrence for him to sweet talk ghosts to get them to move on to their final resting places. Or at least someone else’s house.

“I don’t need to be anywhere. This was all I had planned today.”

“I want to try something. If we can induce your sleep state, here in the office, I might be able to get a sense of what she wants. We call it ‘catching a scent.’ Who knows—she could have died an alcoholic and all she wants is a shot. I’ll also be able to tell if she’s house-bound or body-bound.”

Nora gasped. “Body-bound?”

Redfern sat without saying anything for several seconds, patting his long fingers on the tops of his thighs. “Your email said you’d seen a lot of doctors. Taken lots of drugs. Some were to knock you out and others to take care of your depression, which I don’t think you have. Done tried a deprivation tank and visited a fancy, Californian guru who only want your money and devotion. You said you wanted to sleep again, so you can be healthy again. I’m not trying to scare you, Nora. I’m here to help. But sometimes, sickness comes from a spiritual disturbance. Everything is made out of energy, from the song of the robin to the ions bumping against each other on the surface of the table between us. Clearly, your field of energy has been disrupted.”

Nora considered Redfern’s words. Although she hadn’t had the language for it, feeling that her field of energy had been ‘disrupted’ was surely accurate. She was immediately embarrassed that another person could pick up on it so easily.

She rubbed her arms then couldn’t sit still so began to pace the small space. “So, you’re saying that some dead woman has jumped on me after she died because she’s thirsty for a vodka tonic or wants the drapes in the living room to be a different color?!”

Redfern stood up and steadied Nora by grabbing her shoulders. He guided her back to the couch where she sat back down, planting her face in her hands.

“I don’t know anything for sure, Nora, but if it is a spirit, the regularity of the

visitations tells me she's not giving up. So let me break this down for you: things are not going to get better or go back to normal until she gets what she wants."

Redfern sat on the couch beside her and placed his hand on her bony shoulder. The weight of his hand felt warm through her many layers. She recognized that although she wasn't completely sold on the idea, she did trust the old man. He was kind and gentle and seemed to know a lot about dead people. She reached for another tissue as tears started to flow again.

"I know this is a lot of information to digest," he said as he leaned forward, folding his hands as if in prayer. "Desperate times call for desperate measures."

She sniffed and wadded the tissue tight in her hand. "What's next, then?"

"If you think you're up for it, I'd like to put you in the chair."

Before Nora could say yes or no or ask what chair, Redfern had gotten up and disappeared down the hall. She could hear the opening of a closet, the crash of something metal and then the closet door squeaking back closed.

Redfern returned with a navy blue lawn chair. He unfolded it into its three sections and positioned a heavy, wool blanket in the seat and back. He patted it, as if to let a dog know it was okay to jump up.

"You ever been hypnotized, Nora? Or is that a stupid question, considering all of the work you did before you got to me?"

Nora nodded her head yes and dabbed her eyes with the back of her sleeve as her tissue was now in shreds. Dr. McCardle had sent her to a hypnotherapist. The only benefit that "therapy" had proved was helping her figure out why she'd had testing anxiety in college.

“Is this how shamans roll? A chaise lounge from Wal-Mart and a blankie?”

Redfern laughed. “I’m glad you have a sense of humor. You’re probably going to need it.”

“Are you going to bring her in here, or what?” Nora asked as she stood looking down at the lawn chair.

“Who, Junebug?”

“Who else?”

Nora sat down in the chair. Redfern told her to uncross her legs and loosened her belt, if she was wearing one. He said that it was not his intention to bring the spirit of Junebug into his office, that he only wished to re-create the dream state with the hope of understanding the level at which Nora’s psyche was involved. And to make sure it wasn’t body-bound.

“Could you stop using that word? It’s freaking me out.”

“Do you prefer dispossession? Now, I’m going to drum for a bit, a nice slow, low drum beat and you just concentrate on your breathing. When—or if—Junebug comes into your vision, tell me what you see.” He pulled a satin, forest-green sash from the side pocket of the chair. “I’m going to tie this around your eyes so it can be nice in dark for your optic nerve, okay?”

He wrapped the sash around her head and tied it over her eyes. He reclined the chair so that Nora’s head was tilted slightly downward.

Redfern began to drum. She felt like she might actually go to sleep but after several minutes of the monotonous drum beat, a scene began to emerge. She could only make out a song or chant in the distance, and although it didn’t sound like Redfern’s

talking voice, she knew it was him. She began to report her vision.

“She is at an amusement park. It doesn’t feel like a very big one, just a few rides. There are lots of twinkling lights and the sound of shrieking children. I hear a tuba, the squawk of seagulls. Is it a carnival? Junebug is moving through the crowd with two other women.” Nora’s mouth started to go dry and she tried to swallow. She concentrated on her breath and continued.

“They’re wearing poodle skirts and scarves tied around their necks, ruby red lipstick. They are all very pretty, smooth skin, youthful skin. There’s a man selling cotton candy. He’s fat and has a cigar hanging out of the side of his mouth. The women are shy? But not Junebug.”

The colors in Nora’s mind’s eye started to become more vibrant. In her altered state, she felt the pounding on Redfern’s feet tromping around her. The beat of the drum kept her in the scene. “Junebug shows the man her change purse. It’s blue with yellow polka dots. She turns it upside down and nothing comes out. She’s frowning at the man. He smiles an evil kind of grin at her then laughs, twirling her off a huge cone of the cotton candy. She dances over to her friends. One of them now has a stuffed white teddy bear with a red satin bow.”

Nora’s chest began to tighten as started to smell the scene. She could still make out the low, guttural moans of Redfern’s voice but the scene had become almost three-dimensional. “There’s discarded food all over the ground—hotdogs, pretzels, soda bottles. It’s really humid, and the sun is starting to set. They are in front of a Ferris wheel. Junebug is shaking her head ‘no.’ She does not want to go on that ride.”

Nora’s hands gripped the sides of the chair, digging her nails into the vinyl. “Her

friends grab her arms and try to pull her through the swinging gate leading to the ride. They're pinching her in different places—on her arms, her butt—but Junebug is resisting. She's just staring at the top seat. The seagulls are flying in droves, blocking her view of the seat. Her friends are gone, and she's looking around for them. The seagulls have turned into bald eagles.”

A resounding thwack of the drum snapped Nora out of the vision. A velvety blackness replaced the colors, smells and sounds of her vision. Redfern gingerly peeled back the sash from her eyes. She looked up at Redfern. “I guess that doesn't sound very horrible to you. Scared of heights, big deal.”

Redfern positioned the chair back to its upright seat. He laid his drum and the beater on the table and knelt down in front of her, taking both of Nora's hands in his. “You will need to be very strong, Nora. This spirit isn't trapped, or attached to the material plane. She's on a mission, and she will not stop until that mission is carried out.”

Nora felt a pang of anxiety rise from her stomach into her throat. She blinked at Redfern, waiting for more.

“The fear that you've brought to the mix has manifested as nothing more than the Incantation of Wills. Your will is for things to go back to 'normal,' whatever that looks like. Junebug's will is strong, only we don't know what her mission is. But your resistance is only helping to build the tension. Junebug's drive for the thing she's after has pushed you into being fully open. She's gaining more access. The effects of that are destroying your body and therefore your equilibrium because you're fighting it. I'd venture that's what the snake is about in your dreams. She's the python. Her will is winning against your resistance.”

“And I suppose I’m the little yellow snake?” Nora thought how comforting the last doctor’s menopause theory now looked compared to being haunted, being *possessed*. She felt foolish for reporting such a ‘safe’ dream about carnivals, cotton candy, seagulls.

“Yes, you would be the yellow one.”

“And I suppose the color has some significance?”

Redfern sighed, stood up and then sat on the couch. “Let’s talk about that next time. I think you’ve been adequately initiated into the world of Spirt for one day.”

They made an appointment for two weeks later. Nora thanked him and he warned her again about not steeping the tea too long. As she pulled on her now-dry raincoat, she wondered how she would ever find the strength to drive home. She hoped it had stopped raining, at least.

MICHAEL

May 10, 1995

Portland, Maine

Ms. Sinclair wants us to write this shit down. Or, Josie as she wants us to call her. I didn't read the book she's been talking about for the last three weeks but I have been paying attention and I do think she's smart. Hell, what else are you going to do in jail? Better than watching *Dawson's Creek* in the day room with Hannigan and Sewall. Because I respect her—Josie—I'm going to try doing this. She's told us to start with a "fond" memory and to not think too much about to. "Just let it flow," she says. Alright, then. Here goes.

The lady who raised me I called mama but she was constantly telling me that she was not my mother, that my real mother did not have the "resources" to give me a proper childhood. I wonder what the hell I had, then. I never knew my real mama. She's just a shadow I've been chasing ever since I was able to talk. But Leigh-Anne Jenkins was the best thing a kid like me had coming, the best thing outside of a real mama I could ask. For some reason she didn't want to adopt me. I don't know. Maybe I wore her out, drained her. Maybe she wanted a baby, a kitchie-kitchie-coo baby and not some hyperactive eight-year old. I remember she had the smoothest skin and sky-blue eyes. I would lean up to touch her face just to feel its silky surface. I'd ask, 'How do you get it so soft, Mama?' and she'd first tell me to call her 'Miss Leigh' and then she'd pinch my cheeks and say, 'Cold cream!' It was a long time before I found out that cold cream was

not iced-down milk that ladies who wanted smooth skin kept in the fridge and splashed on their face at night, that it was an actual product. Imagine that! Seeing a carton of half-n-half in a girlfriend's fridge, thinking, 'She knows the trick.'

She was sure good to me though. And I never thanked her. I was just a kid, you know. A kid with needs but I tried writing her a note, see, when I got older thanking her for being my "adopted" mama. I had just turned twenty-six, and was living in Kill Devil Hills, on the Outer Banks. The letters came back I'd mailed to High Point, the only address I had for her. After that, I gave up—makes two mamas I couldn't find. Must have an anti-mama magnet in me.

Driving a cab and shucking oysters was not exactly what I thought I'd be doing at twenty-six but I had lived all over everywhere and was wanting to get back to North Carolina. I had learned how to surf out in Hawaii and California and I needed to see what the home waves were like (yes, they disappointed). Seemed like every surfer I met only knew one thing about North Carolina waters and that was that they were "sharky." Well, this I had to see for myself. I have always been drawn to the ocean and they say our bodies are eighty percent water or something like that and it just makes sense to me to be in it, let the element sort of take you out of yourself. Most the time, I thought nothing of tomorrow. If a big-ass Tiger shark or Hammerhead wanted to nosh on my torso for lunch, so be it. I was doing what I loved, and he was trying to survive, something I also appreciate. When people who had the balls to say it to my face that I was too smart not to have gone to college, I wanted to tell them I hadn't finished high school either. I was a double-loser. But schooling doesn't make you smart in my view of things. Just living

does that and I saw the world as my classroom, my biology lab, my ocean of possibilities. (Alright that was a bad pun but I wanted to work the ocean theme in there).

One way I survived after I left my for-real adopted family was busking. I'd learn how to play the guitar when I was about seventeen and had a decent voice to go with it so people stopped, they listened, they threw money in my hat. After I turned eighteen, I went into the Army, which I hated so I stayed in my room while the other GI's went out to the bars. I practiced my brains out because I needed something to consume me and the guitar did. I could play all the classics that people love—*Smoke on the Water*, *Free Bird*, *Stairway to Heaven*—all that shit. I think I just liked the attention, honestly. Down at Kill Devil Hills, I met the older brother of this waitress I worked with at Awful Arthur's and he introduced me to Stevie Ray. Well, strumming chords on an acoustic felt sort of pointless after that and we got together pretty regularly and played. Dan was a really nice guy, way chill and extremely talented. Was from Chatham County, some small-ass town he claimed they modeled *The Andy Griffin Show* off of. I think he liked me okay. I think he especially liked my pot. Everybody down there thought I was so cool, the surfer dude who plays guitar with the killer bud. I still had a connection in Charlotte and I'd make the long-ass drive every couple of months and bring back what was referred to as Mountain Madness because it was grown in the mountains and it got you really, really high. So yeah. I was a bake king and living for the day in front of me.

Until I met Paige Dunn. *Paige*—hell of a name for a righteous tree-hugger. Sounds like some preppy bitch but she wasn't. She was a wild fire, hardly contained. I met her the summer of 1987. A bunch of us were headed over to Stan's, one of the owners of Awful Arthur's (there was no Arthur, by the way). Stan loved to party and was

lost in his adolescence, a description Paige assigned him later. He never even had to invite anyone over. It was just sort of a given that when we closed up, we were going to Stan's. But nobody left the restaurant until everyone was done. Bartender still washing pint glasses? You better get your ass back there and help her. Come to think of it, it was a damn good motivator for clean-up. Lots of kids did their first line of coke on his coffee table. He was always generous, never had an unkind word to say about anyone and set the precedence for everyone else not to talk shit either. I don't know if you've ever worked in a restaurant but holy hell, is it a bona fide drama shop. Stan was also a bit off, only in the fact that he didn't appear to have any friends his own age. He must have been fifty? Sixty? Who knows. But at twenty-five, I was one of the older kids who worked there. There was the bar manager, Michelle, who was probably about thirty. She never joined us at Stan's.

So one night, this chick gets dropped off. Kill Devil Hills is not the big but there's Nags Head and Ocracoke and well, you might live in one town and work in another. So it wasn't that big a deal that someone we didn't know might wind up at Stan's but it was already really late, like two o'clock in the morning. She opens the screen door, doesn't knock or nothing and comes in yelling, 'You-who!' like she knows Stan. We were all so high and drunk that someone yelled back, 'We're in here,' not even caring who they were saying it to. So she walks into the den and she's wearing this skirt that would put the Carnival girls in Rio to shame. And, she's wearing *pants*. I get the traveling light thing but it was June! Hot as hell and here she comes in layered. That combo was accompanied with a black halter top and jean jacket with ripped-off sleeves. Now, there's some chicks that you see and you think, 'Okay, hearing a different drummer, that's cool, to each his

own' and then there's chicks who may look a little far-out and you might think 'whacked' but you're also thinking, 'I need to know her. I want to hear what she's saying. I want to do whatever she's doing.' This was the vibe Paige was throwing.

So she comes waltzing into Stan's place and stands in the middle of the room, hands on her hips and says, 'This Stan's place?' Smartass Kevin Murphy says, 'Don't know' as he looks over at Stan and says, 'Stan, is this your place?' The reason it was so funny was that even though Kevin was a big smartass, I honestly think he was that high. Like, Stan is sitting in front of him—true enough. Kevin had been over there hundreds of times. But could any one of us actually prove that, yes, this was Stan's place? We all just busted out laughing and Paige—being the good sport that she was—busted out too.

The other thing about that night was that everybody thought Paige was someone else's friend. 'I thought you knew her' and 'I thought she knew Stan.' Someone said she must be Tyler's stepdaughter (Tyler was the other owner of Awful Arthur's). Well, I cozied right up to her and introduced myself. I'd brought my guitar in and it was leaning against the edge of the couch. She'd picked it up, but she didn't know it was mine. She starts playing it and for the life of me, I can't remember what that first song was she played. I wish I could. I like precision around stories and it would be sufficient to plug something in for the sake of the story but I wish I could remember. No surprise that I can't. I was pretty fucked up. Finally, she sits down beside me, which made the total of persons on the couch five, so the neck of the guitar was up in my face and she starts giggling, like it's funny that the pegs are practically going up my nose.

"Whatcha got there?" I asked her, knowing damn well what she had—my guitar in her multi-colored lap.

“A git-fiddle. Call a tune?”

I looked at her funny, with my eyes all squinty. Call a tune? “Do you mean you’re taking requests?”

“Sure.” The twinkle—and I can’t believe I just used that word—in her eyes was right up there with Santa and Leprechauns and Mother Teresa. She had shoulder-length brown, curly hair and really high cheekbones, like a model but a mouthful of horse teeth—big and white and straight. I asked her to play *Captain Jack*. In addition to classic rock-n-roll and the aforementioned Stevie Ray, I was really into Billy Joel. The man had gotten me through some rough shit. And *Captain Jack* was pretty much my anthem. And you know what? She played it. How can you take a piano song like *Captain Jack* and play it impromptu on a guitar? People on the couch who knew the song started singing it. I was belting it at the top of my lungs. It was like we had transported ourselves to a Billy Joel concert on the ship of Stan’s ratty couch.

Maybe it was the combo of working all day, drinking all night and burning one (or three, four?) but about midway through singing, I started to cry. I just went back there, to my special island, just like Bill sings in the song. I got up to go to the bathroom and get myself together but once behind closed doors, I really let loose. It was a good cry, felt like it had been trapped in there for a while. I splashed cold water on my face and blew my nose. Maybe they’d think my eyes were red from the weed.

I walked up to her. “I need my guitar.” She looked small and shrunken in the lumpy couch but my guitar sure did look good in her hands.

“This yours?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Thanks, sailor.” She stuck the guitar out but then pulled it back to her. “Where you off to? Fun’s just starting.”

It was beyond late. I was bone-tired. And although I needed to be in my cab in four hours, there was something about the way she said ‘sailor’ that made me sit back down on that couch. I kept sitting there because she was the most interesting girl I’d ever met in the Outer Banks, possibly ever. She was not from Nags Head or Kill Devil Hills. Despite the accent, I wasn’t sure she was even from North Carolina—she seemed Other-Worldly. I also stayed because, well, she perked up once she found out the guitar was mine.

“Play me something,” she said as she stuck the guitar out at me again.

I looked at her, into those glassy brown eyes that sent sparks flying across the room. And then I took a big old chance and said, “Why don’t I show you something?”

She was surprised but not entirely shocked. I realize how it sounded, like I wanted to show her my cock or something but I wanted to take her to my dune where we could watch the sun come up. Clearly, she was out for the evening. She said ‘sure’ (one of her favorite words, I noticed) and we were off, drove down past Power Point and backed into my special spot so that the bed of the truck was facing the ocean. It’s tricky because vehicles are not allowed down there so you had to kill the lights and if there isn’t a moon, you really can’t see where the hell you’re going. I always kept a gray wool blanket in my truck for such occasions (although I made people think it was for roadside emergencies).

As we lied there talking, fooling around, trading songs, I was already thinking about my anticipated sadness because she’d already said that no, she didn’t live in the Outer Banks and yes, she was only visiting. I was worried about saying goodbye and felt

like I had to act as casual as possible, making myself think that Paige Dunn was the best night of the summer, nothing more—a little gift from the universe that had my name written all over it. Nothing gold can stay, Pony Boy.

The sky was losing its blackness and the gray line of ocean started to get a fuzzy haze over it. I guess I'd fallen asleep because I woke to the sounds of her playing, *Here Comes The Sun*, swinging her hippie feet off the back of the tailgate. I propped myself up and watched her shoulder blades move up and down as she changed chords. I didn't want to disturb her, didn't want to ruin the most perfect moment I've ever known. I think I fell right in love with her at that moment. She will always be my little darling. I can't even listen to the first bar of that song without tearing up.

Turns out Paige wasn't a sprite passing through Middle Earth or a ship-wrecked mermaid come to shore. When the sun shone full-blast and she was still with me, still embodied and writing her aunt's number on the back of my hand, I knew she was real and I knew she'd be mine, at least for a little while. She was a free spirit, had hitch-hiked to the Outer Banks after turning down a Dead ticket for RFK, which she assured me was a highly debated decision. Said she was thinking she'd see one more show but as RFK was in DC, that put her even further away from the aunt's house, which was free and full of "good vibes." She traveled alone, seemed to have endless access to money but no job, and was from a nice family in Anson County, was on good terms with her mom and dad. She was on the road not to get over a heartache or to find herself, which were the two damn-good reasons I had been itinerant. She had some sad stories in tow, I'd find out, but she sure didn't look back after she left something. No regrets, she'd say.

Paige Dunn gave me many things. One of them was something I guess I would have eventually found for myself but maybe not. It was obvious we were into each other and so she decided to spend the rest of her summer in Kill Devil Hills. But, by the end of the summer, like any true gypsy, I could tell her feet were starting to itch, meaning that the grass was beginning to grow under them. So, she took us to Ireland. I say ‘took us’ because she presented me with a ticket from Aer Lingus with my name printed on it and a red stick-on bow, like it was a stocking stuffer. I couldn’t believe it! No one had ever bought me anything that expensive before. It was September, and we’d been seeing each other since she flounced into Stan’s that night, end of June. On one hand, I was embarrassed by it—something so nice, so generous. I had no idea how to accept such a thing. On the other hand, the massive drawbridge that usually is in its up position came banging down and my heart said ‘Come on in, baby.’ I was smitten, had been dropping the L word on and off all summer. But when she gave me a ticket to come with her, to travel with her to Ireland, I felt a surge of love that went well beyond our sultry summer nights. This gesture on her part could only mean things between us were going to the next level.

I followed her lead in Ireland and we busked our way through the South and the West coast. She traveled through that country in the same fashion she had the States: with a lot of charm, some street smarts and a fair amount of pluck. We were in this little place I thought we’d never get to called Doolin. Was supposed to be “the” spot for trad music, which is an abbreviation for traditional Irish music that the whole world knows and loves. It was well-known to Irish musicians but not advertised in the tourist brochures. Paige was into finding the gems, the little hotbeds of music or artisan communities. She also

was really into lay lines, which were supposed to be some ancient grid underneath the earth that led a person to magic or faeries or some such shit. I'm glad we made it to Doolin because the place was a scene and a half! People everywhere playing music, folks pouring out onto narrow streets, pints of beer in their hands. I found out later that there had been a big, annual music festival the week before down in County Kerry and most of the musicians were coming off of that. But the night we got there, we assumed that legends were right, and that we had found a hotbed indeed.

We tried getting jobs. With so many musical people around, it was harder to busk—we were not the only fish in the pond. We did end up opening for one of the weekend bands at this pub called Greene's, a feat I owe Miss Paige. We had like four pounds between us and needed to eat. I was thinking dishwashing because in my experience, that's readily available free food, which would take care of that need. But no one needed a dishwasher not to mention the fact that we were Americans and were traveling, didn't have work visas or anything like that. So, Paige goes up to the barkeep at Greene's—who surely knew us at that point—and asks to speak to the manager. Guy comes out looking really annoyed, a big barrel-chested man with once-auburn hair.

So she says to him, "You in charge of the acts?"

"Aye."

"You ever think about some American tunes, just to warm things up a bit before your headliner?"

"No."

Now here's where I thought any other chick might turn up her love light, if you catch my drift. Tilt the head like a puppy. Act all demure, passive. But instead Paige says,

“Well, my friend and I are looking for a meal is all and I don’t beg so if’ing you’re game, we’d like to do our act for you. If you like it, then maybe we can be your opener tonight. What do you say?”

The man pulled out a chair, straddled it and said, “Make it quick.” I had no idea what the hell she meant by ‘act’ but I’d learned pretty quickly to trust Paige in situations like this one. She hops up on the tiny stage, giving me a head nod that said ‘Come on.’ Please don’t make me play some cheesy-ass duet, like a James Taylor and Carole King thing, I thought. I’d bet Mr. Greene or whatever his name was would have enjoyed that but I was not going to sell myself for a couple of pieces of cod.

I plucked a few strings of my guitar and she whispered into my ear, “You know *The Mighty Quinn?*”

“Dylan? Fuck yeah.” And she smiles back at me and I knew both me and the Irish dude were about to get a show. I start playing it. She starts singing but she doesn’t just sing with her mouth—she sings with her entire body. She takes her jacket off, makes sure her washboard gypsy stomach is visible. She threads the mike cord through her long fingers like she was given one as a baby instead of a pacifier. She’s swinging those non-existent hips, clapping her hands, gyrating a little here and there and I start singing the chorus with her:

Come all without, Come all within

You’ll not see nothing like the mighty Quinn.

She turns her back to the Irish dude and starts singing in my face, weaving back and forth like a cobra and we were in our own little world there for a minute. Another thing about Paige: she had the ability to make you feel like you were the center of the

universe, the only thing that ever mattered, ever. We were literally singing for our supper and having a ball doing it.

I look past her bare shoulders and the Irishman's head is swaying just an inch but his foot is banging itself into the wood floor. We finish the song and he says, "Be back at six. I'll have Seamus make you something now and if you're still hungry after you play, he can make you something else. And, pints on the house for all musicians. But don't take advantage."

So we got fed, we got to play our music for an actual crowd who'd come to see music and we got free beer all night. It was a spectacular evening. The most important thing I learned from Paige happened that night. After we sang the song and got the gig, I teased her about thinking that she was going to use her irresistible girl-charm on him.

"Situation called for something else. Irish people appreciate hard work but they appreciate honesty even more. I could tell he couldn't be bothered with a couple of American kids interrupting his afternoon. But I knew he would respond to someone being straight with him."

"Why? How?"

"Because he probably deals with a lot of people who want more money, who cancel at a moment's notice, waitresses that don't show up. All sorts of things. Someone whose radar for bullshit that is that highly tuned will always respond kindly to the truth. It was the only way to go with him."

I thought about this for a few seconds. She could tell I was chewing on it, not ready to swallow.

“Look. Part of making life on the road pleasant and fun is getting what you need first. Whether it’s convincing people you have something they want or just plain staying safe, you have to be able to read people, to pick up on body language and sense what kind of mood they’re in. You got to take their culture into account, the setting they exist in, instead of seeing it as the place you’re visiting. Your own confidence is important but you have to adjust to their reality, not impose yours. In my experience, you get more in the end than you imagined.”

“Like what just happened? Free beers. Nice work, Paige.”

She stood up from the bar table. “They do that for all the musicians. But it was a nice little surprise, huh?”

All those years I forced my way to getting what I needed, wanted. I just *took*. Paige’s approach to life took into account a whole new way of being. It was enlightening. I was really intrigued by the concept, was sort of embarrassed I’d never thought of it. But there was also a speck of disappointment that bubbled up inside of me as I realized Paige had just described her stealth as an opportunist. It would be years before I ever understood that being an opportunist was an advantageous philosophy for a derelict orphan like me, that it was nothing to be ashamed of.

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