The Ooligan Press Editors' Journal
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Oooligan's Best Short Stories of 2005
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To Our Readers

Welcome to the first ever Ooligan Press Editors’ Journal. Twenty-one advanced editing students in Portland State University’s Publishing Program, a course of study offered through the English Department’s Center for Excellence in Writing, had the opportunity to choose a major project for winter term 2004-2005. They decided to hold a short-story contest, open to anyone with any connection whatsoever to Portland State University.

“We'll know good writing when we see it,” the students firmly believed. So they set neither theme nor mandatory length. The five winning authors would receive the Ooligan Editors’ Choice Award. In addition, the stories would appear in an electronic journal to be created by Ooligan Press, the student-staffed book publishing company associated with PSU’s Publishing Program. In pursuit of print publication, the students would professionally edit the winning stories and submit each of them to five nationally respected literary journals.

The Ooligan editors named the project the “Deny Your Inner Salinger” contest and announced it with a flier on bulletin boards in PSU’s Neuberger Hall and a barrage of emails to past writing and publishing students. Here was every serious scribbler’s chance to unveil the best work in a stash of private writing.

In two weeks, the contest drew seventy-five stories, many of them superb, from the PSU community around the state. Each member of the advanced editing class read every story submitted. The class as a whole selected a short list of some twenty stories. Then, laboriously, they settled on the top five. Each winning author is a writer to watch.

Karen Kirtley
Instructor, Book Editing and Advanced Book Editing

The Ooligan Editors

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Contributors

Katie Sinback earned her MA in Writing in June 2004 from Portland State University, where she won the Haystack Award for Creative Writing and the Tom Doulis Graduate Fiction Writing Award. She recently completed “A Million Little Tragedies,” her first novel, and she publishes “Crudbucket,” her zine, on an extremely irregular basis. Born and raised in Virginia, Katie has lived in Portland, Oregon, since 1995.

Mike Bales is a former newspaper reporter and editor who grew up in Central Florida B.D. (before Disney). He is finishing his master’s degree in creative nonfiction writing at Portland State University. Mike and his wife are expecting their first child in August. They live in Portland with his wife’s mother and two cats.

Loretta Stinson dropped out of high school in the ’70s. She lived and worked in a number of places doing a variety of things. Loretta is now a graduate student in Portland State University’s Creative Writing Program, where she received the Marilyn Folkestad Writing Award and other departmental writing awards. “Cold Spell” is an excerpt from her first novel.

Nancy Hill is a Portland, Oregon, writer and photographer. To feed her two sons (and pay their college tuition), she manages the publications and communications of a state agency and writes freelance articles for national and regional publications. To feed her soul, she writes fiction and does fine art photography. She is currently working on a book-length photo series about fools—her favorite subject—and a coming-of-age novel. She has a master’s in writing from Portland State University’s Excellence in Writing Program. She has a dog, a cat, and a yard that is the envy of weed lovers everywhere.

Twila Jo Nesky is a graduate student in the nonfiction writing program at Portland State University. Twila believes writing is a passport into places she does not belong. She was the winner of the 2001 Burnham Undergraduate Fiction Award and she is a co-winner of the 2004 Tom Bates Graduate Nonfiction Award. Recently, she has been focusing her writing on people with disabilities, on Portland’s wealth of homeless writers, activists, and artists, and on her own need to discover the meaning of home.
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Beyond the Barry Manilow world of Jane Buchanan’s headphones, a white Chevy Suburban ignored a red light and hit a woman cyclist. Downtown workers on their mid-afternoon breaks stopped remarking on the unseasonably sunny weather and rushed to the fallen woman, her bent bike on top of her. The contents of her basket were strewn like confetti on the street, gutters, and sidewalk. Pens, textbooks, a pair of sneakers tied together at the laces, a marbled composition notebook—all lay scattered on the ground, forgotten in the concerned huddle around the cyclist. The Suburban driver stood back, one hand cupping his mouth, the other still clutching a phone, until a woman in a red suit screamed at him to call an ambulance. The cyclist wasn’t conscious.

Jane rounded the corner from Stark Street onto Tenth Avenue, kicking the same piece of gravel she’d found a block ago with the inside of her thrift-store penny loafers. She had heard the screech and the horrible thud of impact over Manilow’s song about the fate of Lola the showgirl in “Copa Cabana.” Jane saw the huddle and almost turned back to avoid the accident scene, but the notebook caught her eye like a shiny nickel in a fountain. She pulled her headphones down around her neck and walked toward the notebook, its pages fluttering in the breeze. After a quick sweep of the crowd, she bent down, grabbed the notebook, and stuffed it beneath her faded black sweatshirt. A few yards away, the cyclist’s half-opened hand appeared to reach out toward Jane through a small break in the crowd surrounding the scene. Jane looked away, glad she wasn’t able to see much more of the woman on the ground. She imagined enough images to scar a million dreams. She pulled the headphones back over her ears; Barry reassured her like he always did.

The church bells rang four o’clock. Shit, Jane thought. She’d promised Corina she’d be at the Barracuda, their favorite divey hangout, by three thirty. Corina got out of class early on Fridays and liked to slide into the weekend loaded on Cosmopolitans and the little pink pills she got from a pharmacist she’d slept with a few months ago. Corina had told Jane all about the pharmacist—his callused hands, how he liked to tie her up with pantyhose—but she refused to tell her the name of the pills or what they did. In some ways, Jane knew Corina so well she could describe her bones, but in others, she was as much a mystery as the women Barry Manilow tried to figure out in his songs. Then again, Jane hadn’t revealed that Barry was the music always playing in her Walkman—she let Corina assume it was something cool and current.

Jane had met Corina during her fall quarter at Portland City College in a yearlong fiction-writing workshop—the theory being that as the students became intimately familiar with each other’s work, they would become more adept at offering feedback. The class critiqued Corina’s story first. Jane thought it brilliant, but the claustrophobic circle of aspiring writers disagreed. The woman Corina later named “the Hawk” ripped it apart with
accusations of one-dimensional characters and a ridiculous plot. “I mean, what’s up with all the ducks? This girl can’t see ducks everywhere; it’s ludicrous.”

The rest of the class nodded in agreement, adding their own variations on the Hawk’s merciless critique. The professor, whose face was the shade of coconut cream pie and whose gangly fingers rifled through the photocopied pages in search of offending passages, excused the class early that day in some sort of “time out” gesture so everybody could cool down.

As Corina stuffed the pile of critiqued copies into her leather shoulder bag, Jane walked over with her own copy full of stars and “wonderfuls.” She liked the ducks. They symbolized innocence mangled by the machinery of the world. When she read it the night before, the story had brought her to tears.

“Your story was amazing,” Jane said, holding out the stapled pages.

“Thanks,” Corina said. She trained her pale green eyes on Jane. “Why the fuck didn’t you say anything when they were shoving it up my ass?”

The story hovered between them, firm in Jane’s grip. “I don’t know. Do you need their approval?”

Corina grabbed the story and crammed it into her bag. “Good point.” She cocked her head to the side. “Want to get a drink?”

“Only if it’s alcoholic,” Jane said.

“Oh, a comedian.” Corina heaved her full bag over her shoulder.

“That’s the least of my talents.”

But this Jane—the snappy-comeback Jane—was a new Jane, the Corina-Jane. Without Corina, Jane haunted the corners of her small world, plugged into her Walkman and scribbling in her journal. She kept the door to her small studio apartment locked as she listened to the world honking, pissing, and farting its way through the day outside her window.

Before Corina, Jane’s focus had been her body: her once fat, now thin body. For the entire first year of her life in Portland, Jane followed the Susie Greg diet plan, which, as promised, caused her to “shed the weight, and feel the great.” After she lost eighty pounds, Susie herself had asked Jane if she wanted to be the Susie Greg “before and after girl.” Jane agreed, and now her “before and after” pictures were plastered on buses and billboards, and on Wednesdays, they greeted her from the back page of the local arts paper.

She soon learned that local fame wasn’t worth the small stipend Susie Greg, Inc. paid for the use of her image. The last time Jane had tried to take the bus from her apartment to school, a drunken man with raw, red eyes and knotted hair had spotted her picture on an idling bus and started shrieking at her.

“What happens after the after, goddamnit? After the after, after the after . . . .”

He brought his face close to hers. He reeked of beer and piss. Jane gagged and stepped away.

A well-dressed woman passed by and pulled her cell phone from her ear. “Want me to call the police?” she asked in a blasé tone Jane instantly admired. The man hopped around on his right foot, then his left foot, wailing, eyes fixed on Jane.
Jane shook her head. “I’ll walk.” She hadn’t taken the bus since.

She had grown tired of her minor fame. Her classmates, her teachers, the guy who made her lattes—all recognized her from the bus pictures, and all felt compelled to offer congratulations on her miraculous transformation. She was no longer a member of the fat loser club of her “before” photo—a poorly lit shot of her slumped on the couch, frowning, in stained sweatpants and a yellow t-shirt with a Christmas gift on her lap, her long chestnut hair stringy and tangled. Now, Jane was the “after” girl of the second photo. She wore a slinky black dress and heavy makeup, both provided by Susie Greg’s cadre of stylists, and both completely false representations of Jane—the Susie-Jane. The Susie-Jane had sloping cheekbones and sassy, short, intentionally rumpled hair with blonde highlights. The outer halo of her fat became another bad Christmas memory.

Instead of feeling pride for enduring the calorie deprivation and the exercise regimen that got her to the “after,” whenever Jane saw the pictures, she felt a weird betrayal of the “before” girl. The frown in the “before” pictures had nothing to do with being overweight. The photo was taken on Christmas morning two years ago when her mother had been so hung over she couldn’t get out of bed. Her mother—whose main activity in life was telling everyone in the small town of Shenandoah, where Jane had grown up, how important the Buchanans were to Virginia history—blamed the hangover on Jane’s planned move to Portland. It was breaking her heart. She was inconsolable. Jane’s father had snapped the picture after informing Jane of his plans to spend the remainder of the day in his study, likely burrowing into his Civil War history books as he always did when he wished to block out her mother’s shrill voice.

This past Christmas, Jane had escaped with only a week-long visit to her parents. Over the phone, her mother tried to convince her to stay longer, but Jane lied.

“We only get a week off.”
“My Lord, that’s downright un-Christian,” her mother exclaimed.
“This isn’t Virginia. They don’t care so much.”
“What a horrible place.”
Jane agreed. “You’d hate it here.”

Portland was hers. Jane’s newly slinned body might belong to Susie Greg and her ratty couch and slouching bed to the rental agency, but the streets she walked and the worlds that frothed up in her mind as she walked them were all hers. This time, her mother couldn’t have any of it.

The Barracuda was a long, dim hall lined with a sparsely occupied bar punctuated by three small tables in the far back. On most days, Corina and Jane were the only women in the place, but the regulars—most of them veterans of wars and hard living—didn’t bother them. At the other bars they’d tried out, men wouldn’t leave them alone. Corina’s delicate bone structure, shiny penny-red hair, sheer black dresses, and wicked laugh lured them like a siren song.

The afternoon light cut through the bar’s gloom when Jane opened the door. She spotted Corina in the back, hunched over her journal, scribbling furiously. They hadn’t
seen each other since Jane’s trip home for the holidays. Even in the darkness of the bar, Corina shone. Jane ordered a vodka-cranberry. As she reached inside her bag for her wallet, the notebook she had taken from the accident scene slipped out from underneath her sweatshirt. She quickly stuffed it in her backpack and walked with her drink to Corina’s table. Two empty glasses and one half-empty glass of wine lined the edge of Corina’s notebook. She was doodling a cartoon duck with huge breasts and a bold-faced penis.

“Quack, quack,” Jane said, setting the drink on the table.

“My girl is back.” Corina leaped up and wrapped her skinny arms around Jane’s tall frame in a tight embrace.

The spicy scent of Corina’s perfume—something expensive bought by one of her many suitors—whipped up around them. Jane dropped her bag onto the chair and sank into Corina’s bony embrace. Home, she thought, thank god I’m home.

That night, Jane staggered into her apartment a few minutes before eleven o’clock. Her hair was a dripping helmet, and her sweatshirt, t-shirt, and jeans were soaked. Water pooled in the arches of her ill-fitting penny loafers. The clouds and rain had returned to downtown Portland around the time that Corina and Jane ran out of cigarettes and were too wobbly to order more drinks from the Barracuda’s surly bartender. Jane probably should have called a cab like Corina, but the walk was too seductive. The thought of the music echoing through her head as she passed by drunks huddling below pawnshop awnings and prostitutes strutting by in twos propelled Jane onto the rain-slick streets. As two Burnside Street regulars teetered by on improbably high heels, Jane thought, it’s like Noah’s ark out here: whores and beggars, Jane and Corina. The ark would take them all. She started to spin it into a story, her drunkenness providing the coat of gloss that made her nugget of an idea pure gold. And then her mother’s mortified face popped into her head, sucking the idea into a black hole of aborted aspirations. Every story she tried to write suffered a similar fate.

In her apartment, Jane peeled off her waterlogged clothes and pulled on a pair of sweatpants. For company, she flipped on the TV. The local news theme crackled through its crappy speakers. She opened her backpack and removed a soggy folder of her classmates’ work to critique left over from fall term, a book of advice for young writers, and the composition notebook from the accident scene. In all her and Corina’s talk about their uniquely miserable holidays at home, Jane had forgotten about the stolen notebook.

A coiffed newswoman’s face filled the TV screen. “A young biologist’s life was cut short today by the careless actions of a distracted driver . . . .”

The pages of the notebook curled at the ends from the moisture. Jane wiped it over her sweatpants, and opened it to the middle.

“. . . . A promising student, a caring friend, and a dedicated cyclist are words that are being used to describe Maria but according to her friends and family, she was much more.” The newswoman paused.

Jane opened the notebook, looked back at the TV, and realized she was holding an artifact of this Maria, the dead woman whose picture flashed on the screen. As the camera jumped from weeping person to weeping person, Jane skimmed the pages in front of her.
The first page was unremarkable: a lunch menu, a to-do list, a few admonitions to study for her Organic Chemistry exam. She turned the page.

*Today I am a new person, a girl, a flower, because I found him and he loves me. He calls me his rosebud. He licks me everywhere as soon as I shut the door to his office. We make love on his desk, his chair, the floor, among the papers he should be grading. Tomorrow he is reserving the lab for us. It is risky, I know, but somehow I don’t care. I’ve never breathed like this before. Today I realize that I have been riddled with illness all my life and never known it. Walter is the cure.*

Jane looked back to the television. The camera shot a close-up of a man with a mass of curly hair and huge brown eyes. He choked back tears as he spoke.

“I loved Maria more than anything,” he said. “The man who did this should pay, but nothing will ever bring her back—I know that.” His face crumpled into tears.

Jane turned to the next page.

*I should feel guilty about Jason, but I don’t. Why should I feel guilty for finally living, for breathing? It’s not Jason’s fault. He just doesn’t get me like Walter. He doesn’t know that I am vicious and evil, that I have darkness and fantasies. Walter knows and still he wants more. How can I love a man whose biggest fault is his lackluster lovemaking? Jason, I’m sorry, but I won’t stop. I can’t. I am addicted to Walter Bronson.*

A business card was stapled to the page. Walter Bronson, Ph.D., a professor of biology at Portland City College. Maria had drawn hearts around his name and changed the periods to little flowers. Jane put the journal down beside her and turned back to the TV. The newscaster spoke about how the cycling community was especially affected by such a preventable, tragic death.

Jane thought of calling Corina, who would probably be crawling into bed with a massive glass of water and her man *du jour*, a visiting poetry professor named Sheldon Jaynes, but decided against it. Corina would be pissed. Jane poured a small glass of vodka and eyed the journal. She clicked off the television. Slow news day, she thought.

Jane’s heartbeat raced. Her writing professor rifled through the stories to be critiqued, stealing occasional glances at the clock. The rest of the class listened raptly to the Hawk’s gossip about the visiting poet, Sheldon Jaynes, and the rumor that he was having an affair with a student. The Hawk pulled out a tube of pink lip gloss and put a fresh coat on her wide mouth. She smacked her lips to distribute the gloss and then continued with her story, her sharp chin working up and down at a dizzying pace. She feigned outrage over the relationship but relished every detail. Jane was the only person Corina had told about the affair with Sheldon, at least that’s what Corina said.
Across the room from Jane, Corina punched the buttons of her cell phone so that it wouldn't interrupt the critique of the day's story, Jane's first story to be discussed. Jane tried to catch her eye, but Corina was avoiding her, staring at the words on her desk. Jane's words, sort of.

The professor cleared his throat. “Okay now, enough soiling of this man's good name for one day. Let's get to work. I believe Ms. Buchanan is first on our list.”

Jane looked down at the copy of her story. What had seemed a brilliant idea—to replace her hundred unsuccessful story attempts with a slightly enhanced version of Maria's journal—had melted into a marsh of squiggle s and dashes. Glop. In this moment, Jane questioned her impulse to return to school, to enroll in the writing class, to defy her mother's wishes by moving across the country. School had been her only choice if she wanted money from her grandmother's trust fund, the trust fund that had its own built-in shield against her mother's money-hungry hands.

On her twenty-first birthday, Jane had learned of the million-dollar trust fund that was all hers, but which could only be used for school-related or medical expenses, should she ever get a debilitating illness. One day later, she announced she would move to Portland after the holidays to live among trees that never grew brown and dead like the oaks in her parents' yard. Jane was determined not to wilt along with the rest of the Buchanans. She would not be trapped by tradition and work some crappy secretarial job in her father's faltering real estate business. When Jane stepped from the train that brought her to Portland, the discomfort she had carried all her small-town life fell away. Her mother's final pleas for Jane to remain in the house faded. For the first time, Jane felt like her own person instead of the repository for her mother's projections of what a Buchanan should be.

In the tight circle of students at the fiction workshop, the professor scanned Jane's story and asked the class for comments. Jane caught Corina's eye. Corina mouthed "fuck you" while the rest of the class searched Jane's words for mistakes, pimples, and any splashes of brilliance.

The Hawk, as always, spoke first. “This character thinks she's like the first person to ever have an affair. I mean the language is so overwrought, like on page 5: 'I am a new person, a girl, a flower . . .' That is so cliché. I had a hard time getting past it, especially when she feels absolutely no sympathy for Jason. Then again, who is Jason? We barely get much of a description other than the fact that he's shitty in bed.” The Hawk paused her rapid-fire speech. “Anybody else get that?”

Jane had taken the dead woman's journal and made some additions, a few subtractions, and changed some details like the name of the professor, Walter Bronson, who, in the week since she took the journal, Jane had stalked through daily passes by his office. He was in his office only one of those times. His slim frame was bent over a large stack of papers bathed in the yellow light of his desk lamp. His wire-rimmed glasses were pushed up on his forehead. The wiry muscles in his arm flexed and relaxed as he marked the pages in front of him. Sensing Jane's stare, he looked up and through his open office door to where Jane stood in the corner by the door to the stairway. Their eyes met for a
moment before she bolted out the door, wrapping the journal in her arms closer to her chest.

In class, the other students piped their agreement with the Hawk’s assessment of Jane’s story: no plot, poor characterization, a vague setting. More than once it was said that the narrator had read too many sappy romances. Jane pretended to scribble notes based on their comments, a willing sponge for their wisdom.

“Now, shall we hear what the author has to say for herself?” The professor turned to Jane.

“I got something to say.” Corina let the pages flop to her desk.

Jane looked up from her pretend note-taking.

“This character is a cocksucking whore who can’t keep her mouth shut. This whole professor thing is a diversion for her real vice, which is gossip. This is a masterful character study of a bloody, stinking whore.”

Jane hadn’t told a soul about Corina and the poet. She hadn’t even written it down in her own journal. The story she handed in had nothing to do with Corina and Sheldon, no similarities but the situation. She had assured Corina of that fact when she gave out the story—“This may sound kind of familiar,” she had said, “but I promise it’s fiction”—and Corina had smiled and nodded and tucked the story into her leather bag. But the Hawk’s gossip turned the similarity into evidence against Jane.

As the professor tried to stutter out a workshop justification for Corina’s outburst, Jane put her head in her hands. Giggles frothed from her belly. She put her hand over her mouth to keep them from coming, but she couldn’t help it. Her laughter was quick and forceful. She sounded like a distressed duck. The class stared at her, their faces a mixture of puzzlement and horror, except for Corina, who had started laughing too. Jane and Corina had tuned in to a frequency of absurdity that nobody else could hear. Jane excused herself and took her bags into the empty hallway. Corina followed.

In the empty hallway, Jane turned to Corina.

“I didn’t tell,” Jane said, serious now, the laughter just a temporary malady like a sneezing fit. “My story wasn’t about you.”

Corina held out her skinny arms. “I know, Jane. You wouldn’t do that.” They hugged. She whispered in Jane’s ear, “I guess I got kinda bored in there. Those fucks needed some shaking up.”

The professor poked his head out of the classroom and quickly withdrew it. Jane thought of the dead woman, Maria, and wondered if she could hear the class critique her writing, her affair, her character. Was Maria the force pushing Jane to watch Walter Bronson? Was she making Jane carry the journal around with her everywhere, reading it at every spare moment?

The waistband to Jane’s pants gaped open. The button had popped off during her laughing fit in class. Since returning from Christmas in Virginia, Jane’s clothes had become uncomfortably tight. During her visit her mother insisted that Jane try every kind of cookie made, and for Christmas dinner her mother made both a turkey and a ham. As it had been her whole life, her mother offered fattening goodies with one hand and slapped Jane away
from them with the other, all the while muttering about “eating to live and not living to eat.” It hadn’t helped that Jane’s time in the gym had been replaced with time at the bar with Corina.

“Wanna get the hell outta here and get some drinks?” Corina asked.

“Only if you have a safety pin and some money.” Jane pointed at her pants. She tried to suck in her gut to pull them closed.

“Oh shit.” Corina searched her bag for a safety pin. She pulled out a wad of cash instead. “Woo hoo, I forgot about this little windfall.”

“From the guy?” Jane asked, aware that Sheldon’s name was off limits in such close vicinity to the Hawk.

Corina nodded. “Not the guy, but a guy. Let’s go.”

It didn’t occur to Jane that she hadn’t responded to her classmates’ comments on her story until she and Corina reached the Prickly Pear, a new bar Corina frequented when the Barracuda was too depressing. Her classmates’ questions dangled in the greenish light of the classroom while she and Corina drank away their first almost-fight in the comfort of wooden booths and shiny brass railings.

Corina bought the first round of martinis and told stories about Sheldon and his strange habits. Some mornings she awoke with Sheldon’s face a few inches from hers with a feeling that he had been sucking her breath from her lips as she slept, though he said he was merely memorizing the curves of her face. He was hideous and brilliant and strange in bed, but Corina loved the challenge of him.

Jane added her own stories—lies every one of them—about her supposed one-time fiancé, Ricky. It was easier to fabricate her own doomed romance than to admit that she’d never had what Corina called her own “set of chains”—a relationship based on love, lust, sex, coffee, or whatever reasons people clung to each other until they couldn’t stand the sight of each other’s faces.

Although Jane had made up the relationship with Ricky, the quiet black boy from Jane’s tenth-grade geometry class was real. He existed in the world somewhere, maybe still in Shenandoah raising a family and successfully forgetting he ever knew Jane Buchanan. Jane didn’t know. Her mother forbade her from ever talking to Ricky again after the principal had caught Jane and Ricky making out behind the industrial wing dumpster when they were supposed to be in the cafeteria eating lunch. She still remembered the smell of oil from the rag pile in the dumpster mixed with Ricky’s sour smell, the feel of his fingers as they raked over her back and flirted with unlatching the hook on her bra, and the look of terror in Ricky’s eyes when the principal pulled them apart.

The next day when she called to Ricky from across the hallway, a loud and desperate yell that caused the murmur of conversation around them to halt, he refused to even look at her. In classes they shared, he requested a different seat, the one furthest from Jane. People whispered behind her back. She caught various fragments: I heard he can’t get into college now . . . her mom made the principal promise . . . ‘he got detention ’til the end of the year . . . for HER? Ricky had been the only person at school to even talk to her. They
were both outcasts, but now he was the respected outcast, and she had finally earned her title as another one of those crazy Buchanans.

Across the table from Jane, Corina tossed her hair over her shoulder. Perfectly on cue, a man in a sleek blue suit at the bar started toward their table.

“We need to find you a man,” Corina said, chewing on a straw.

“You mean a ‘set of chains’?” Jane tossed back the rest of her martini and shivered at the burn in her gut. Even though men noticed the Susie Greg-Jane, she didn’t care much for their attention. It had something to do with Ricky. Jane wanted only the things she couldn’t have. The rest was so easy it wasn’t worth the trouble.

“This is about Ricky, right? You need to get over him. He’s gone. He isn’t flying out to Portland to beg for your forgiveness.”

The man from the bar stood beside their table. “May I join you ladies?”

Corina nodded.

Jane stood up. “I have homework.”

“Wimp.”

“Later.”

The man looked pleased to have Corina to himself. They always did until Corina grew bored with their company and free drinks. Jane knew Corina would phone Sheldon in the midst of what the man probably thought to be a promising conversation, and start talking dirty to Sheldon with the man squirming in his seat beside her. Then the man would excuse himself and walk away muttering something about “bitches,” while Corina laughed into the phone.

The dead woman, Maria, was on TV again. The newscaster talked about the weekly rallies being planned in her honor while the same picture of Maria playing a guitar flashed on the screen. A chunk of Maria’s curly brown hair fell over her right eye in the picture. For the past week, since Jane had used Maria’s journal as fodder for her fiction-writing workshop, she had been dreaming about the picture, dreaming that she tucked that chunk of brown hair behind Maria’s ear so that she could keep playing the guitar. When the picture flashed on the TV, Jane was almost surprised to see the hair still covering the woman’s eye.

She couldn’t wait until a new flavor-of-the-month news story caught the local media’s attention so she could stop seeing that picture, but for now they were stuck on Maria. After the photo of Maria, a picture of the driver who killed her flashed on the screen. The picture had been taken for the society pages of The Portlander, and in it the fat driver whose forehead was illuminated with the camera’s flash toasted his companion, whose face was blurred so as not to reveal her identity. The way they showed the photos, it almost seemed like the man was toasting the woman he had run down two weeks ago. Next they showed the boyfriend, Jason. He’d lost weight since the first interview, and his eyes looked hollow. Jane had to turn the channel whenever he came on. Just hearing his shaky voice describe how his life was forever changed by Maria’s death and how he would campaign against cell phone use while driving by holding weekly vigils, made Jane nauseous.
She leaned over to turn the channel and yet another button popped off her black pants. It was the third this week. Not to mention that her leather miniskirt barely fit over her hips, and the black dress she wore for the Susie Greg “after” photo no longer zipped up past her waist. Whenever she was in her apartment, she slipped on a pair of sweatpants and swore to go to the gym the next day. She had missed her last three Susie Greg appointments because Corina convinced her that she could do it on her own. “Just don’t eat,” she said.

In Corina’s world things were that simple. When she was with Corina, the tangle of the world somehow untangled. Corina was a dart sailing through the universe, clear in her purpose and not troubled by the questions that tore at most people’s insides. When things got messed up in her life, she fixed them. No hedging about right and wrong, just action. But Jane always seemed to get lost in the tangle. Voices echoed through her mind but none of them were hers. Jane liked being around decisiveness. It was better than men or martinis.

Jane leaned over and pulled a box of clothes, evidence of her old life locked away like prisoners, out from under the bed. She held up the pair of jeans she had displayed at a Susie Greg meeting as proof of her weight loss. Everybody had applauded her then. They had chanted, “We won’t go back” like protesters at some rally. Susie herself had looked Jane in the eye and told her how proud she was of her commitment and then asked her to be the new Susie Greg girl.

The phone rang. Jane let the machine pick it up. Corina. Her voice had a weird catch in it. “Are you there, Jane? Fuck, it’s me. Sheldon fucking dumped me this morning over goddamn coffee. Fucking shithead, little-dicked motherfucker. I think he’s fucking the Hawk now. Can you believe that shit? That cunt.” Corina paused for a moment to take in another shaky breath. “Call me as soon as you get this, Jane. I’m at the Barracuda. I’m buying.”

Walter has taken to calling me his Turkish Delight, his favorite candy when he was a doctoral candidate living in some slum in Seattle. He takes my fingers into his mouth and sucks them like they are filled with caramel. I feel like a criminal watching him, the way his lips slip over my knuckle and pause at the tip. These dry lips that give homework and explain why we need to stop seeing each other. Walter cried today. He saw Jason in the cafeteria and wanted to confess everything to him. I am an ugly person. I felt exhilarated by his tears, powerful. He can’t stop seeing me. He won’t unless I say so. I wonder when that day will come, when I will stop yearning to wear fishnet pantyhose so that he can rip them off when we get to his office. Or maybe I’m fooling myself. The end won’t be so peaceful. I won’t be the one in control. Jason will find out and leave me, and I will be the one begging Walter to take me in. Girlfriend instead of mistress.

Jane swore the journal spoke to her from its place tucked in the pocket of her backpack. It was the tell-tale heart. It whispered, “Walter, Walter,” while Jane walked the
familiar stretch of street between her apartment and the Barracuda. After drinks with Corina the voice said, “Ricky, Ricky.” Jane turned up the volume on her headphones, but the voice filled the edges of sound like smoke, persisting in every small silence, clawing “Ricky, Ricky.” Still, Jane hadn’t told anybody about the journal. Corina was so focused on her own problems, the matter of Sheldon and the Hawk, that she didn’t ask Jane why she was so quiet or why she had started skipping the fiction workshop. Instead of attending class, Jane walked the streets of Portland tempting the voice to tell her more.

When Jane reached her apartment after an afternoon drinking session with Corina, a letter from Susie Greg, Inc. poked out of her mailbox. She went inside, poured herself a small glass of wine, and opened the letter. The campaign using Jane’s “before and after” pictures was over. She would no longer be faced with herself smiling uncomfortably from the sides of buses and billboards. In the letter, Susie thanked her for her time and wished her well in her “new and improved future,” mentioning in smaller type that the Susie Greg services would no longer be free to Jane. The final check for use of her image was enclosed, $235.35 for her trouble. Jane picked up the phone and dialed the number on the Susie Greg, Inc. letterhead.

“Susie Greg, your thin tomorrow begins today,” chirped the receptionist.
“Is Susie there?” Jane tapped a cigarette from its pack.
“What is this regarding?”
“This is regarding how I’m getting fucking fat again,” Jane said, patting her bag for a book of matches. “I wanna talk to Susie.”
“Susie’s gone home for the day, but I can transfer you to one of our counselors. They can set you back on the road to your thin tomorrow.”
“No, I want to talk to Susie.”
“I’m sorry; she’s gone for the day. Would you like to leave a message?”
Jane set the phone down while she lit the cigarette. The receptionist’s voice repeated “Hello?” several times before the click of disconnection.

Jane smoked. The off-the-hook, signal bleated from the telephone. As a child, Jane would find the phone off the hook and that sound filled her with a particular panic. She had imagined her house a blinking dot on the telephone map of the city, a disconnected household, a rogue colony. When she replaced the phone, something inside her would ease into place, despite the certainty of her mother’s scolding. Her mother kept the phone off the hook to avoid the bill collectors who called daily. Her mother refused to surrender the valuables that collected dust in their crumbling mansion in order to pay a measly water bill. She always flew into a rage when Jane’s father suggested it.

Jane took a drag from the cigarette and held the phone to her ear, its haywire beeping loud. She set it down and reached for the journal.

A week later, Jane returned to her apartment at four thirty, just after Burnside became crammed with cars trying to escape downtown Portland for the lush lawns of suburban bliss. The red light on her answering machine was insistent. Four messages: two from her mom and two from Corina. Both accused Jane of avoiding them. Whereas Corina sounded
pissed and impatient, her mother’s voice warbled with sadness. She sounded like a dejected lover pleading for recognition. Jane pressed erase and went to the kitchen to pour a drink. Maybe she should toss the message machine in the garbage and relieve herself of these telephone obligations.

She had skipped her writing seminar again, despite the promise of an amusing excoriation by Corina of the Hawk’s poorly plotted, barely veiled tale of her budding relationship with Sheldon. Jane’s grades were going down the tubes with every missed week of class. She pushed from her mind the idea that the lawyers who controlled her trust fund could deny her money if she failed.

Before returning home she walked by Bronson’s office, and, when she found it vacant, she stuffed one of the pages from the dead woman’s journal under his door. She imagined him picking it up and collapsing into tears, wondering as Jane did if Maria was still watching him.

The phone rang. Jane picked it up, sensing that Susie Greg was returning one of the many messages she had left since receiving the letter a week ago. Her most recent message was laced with accusations about the Susie Greg conspiracy: the weight loss only lasted long enough for the “after” photos. “What happens after the after?” she demanded, just as Susie’s voicemail informed her that it would stop recording in five seconds.

“Susie?” Jane said into the phone.

“Jane?” Corina asked.

Jane considered dropping the phone and sprinting out the door, the dead woman’s journal clutched to her chest, but it was too much trouble. “Hey Corina,” she said, trying to sound casual.

“No, no—” Jane scrambled for an excuse.

“My machine’s been acting weird. I think the tape’s warped or something.”

“Why haven’t you called me? Why haven’t you been in class? The Hawk was totally ragging on you. She said you were too afraid to come back after they destroyed your story.”

There were voices in the background.

The sound of Corina’s voice was strangely comforting, like the haywire off-the-hook beeping of the phone. Both were barely contained craziness, constant and alarming. Jane felt stupid for avoiding her. Corina was all she had.

“I’m sorry, I’ve been feeling fucked up lately. I gained almost twenty pounds and I feel like shit.”

“Oh Jane, I don’t care if you’re a fatso. I love you.”

Fatso. Nobody had ever said it to her face.

“I know. I’m sorry, really,” Jane said.

“To make it up to me, you will meet me at the Barracuda in twenty minutes where you will help me plan my revenge on Mr. Sheldon Jaynes and his newest slut.”
Jane agreed. She grabbed the journal and stuffed it in her bag. She rummaged through her closet and pulled out the only dress she had brought with her to Portland, a long black silk shirt dress that strategically hid the bulge at her hips. Her mother’s advice to never throw anything away was finally coming in handy.

Corina insisted on tequila shots. They’d each had three when Jane reached into her bag and pulled out the journal. Corina ran a hand laden with silver rings through her hair. She looked tired. In the week since Jane had last seen her, Corina had lost some of her glitter. Corina’s eyes fell on the water-wrinkled notebook on the table.

“And what may I ask is this?”

“My discovery,” Jane said. She told Corina the whole story: the accident, the secret romance, her stalking of Walter Bronson.

“Holy fuck.” Corina flipped through the pages, pausing on juicy passages and reading them aloud. “ ‘He calls me his Turkish delight?’ Jesus, ‘I am a flower?’ ” Corina cackled. “So this is where all that cheesy shit in your story came from. I knew you were better than that. I just didn’t want to say anything.”

“Yeah.” Jane shrugged.

And then the voice started again. It had never spoken when she was with people, talking, but now it was strong and clear. “Ricky, Ricky,” it said. Jane looked around the dark bar to see if anybody was by chance calling out for a friend, but she only found the bartender and an old drunk at the far end of the bar.

While Corina scanned the pages, laughing at the dead woman’s overwrought metaphors and cliché descriptions, Jane thought of Ricky and that afternoon behind the dumpster when she was fifteen.

After the incident with Ricky and the principal, Jane had arrived home from school where her mother was waiting, a gin and tonic in her manicured hand.

“Sit,” her mother had said, pointing at the couch.

Jane had sunk into the plush pillows of the velvety green couch, and dropped her backpack onto the floor beside her. Inside the bag, tucked behind her geometry homework, was the note from Ricky. “Meet me at the dumpster. Lunch. We’ll be safe there,” it said. And across town in Ricky’s pocket sat Jane’s note: “Can we be alone? I want to kiss you, Ricky.”

Jane’s mother paced the length of the room, the ice from her drink clinking against the glass.

“You may have destroyed everything I’ve tried to build, we’ve tried to build.” She paused at the edge of the tattered heirloom rug. “This may mark the Buchanan downfall, you realize that? Thank god your father is at work, it would break his proud heart to hear of his daughter cavorting with a . . . black.” Her lip curled over “black.”

After being raised on a steady diet of her family’s supposed importance, Jane thought this moment of ruin would fill her with shame and regret. It didn’t. Ever since Ricky’s lips had pressed against hers and his arms had pulled her close to him, Jane felt like she had been dipped in glitter. Blood whirred through her veins. Her skin was alive to
every shift in wind, every movement. Ricky tasted like stale Juicy Fruit. She wished to never forget that sour-sweet taste.

“What do you have to say for yourself, Jane?”

Silence. Jane shrugged. She pulled her legs in tighter.

“I need an answer. Your principal demands an answer. He’s keeping that boy after school until he gets my call.” Jane’s mother sipped from her glass.

Jane stared at the floor. The wonderful rush in her belly subsided. She looked back to her mother.

“I want to know whose idea this was,” her mother said. “I’ll understand if he made you. Those boys can be scary, I know.” And then her tone grew soft and slithery like a water moccasin. “I know how hard it can be to find suitable boys, Jane. You don’t have to tell me that most of them can’t see past their own privates. You’re such a smart girl, a proud girl.”

In her mind, Jane added, a girl that nobody wants. She looked away again, holding back the tears that gathered behind her eyes.

“My own mother let me learn the hard way about men.” Her mother looked past the sofa where Jane sat. “She was a firm believer in letting me make my own foolish mistakes, letting me find out what those pricks really want.” She sucked down the last drops of her drink.

“Cut the crap, Jane. I need to know now. Did he make you do this? I know my little girl isn’t capable of such thoughts. It was this Ricky boy, he made you do it, he did.” Her mother pointed her empty glass in Jane’s direction. “They are tricky, Jane, they’ll fool with your mind. Did he make you do this?”

Something collapsed inside of Jane. She nodded.

“Yes?” her mother asked.

“Um hm,” Jane mumbled.

Her mother swooped in for a hug. Jane was caught in the whirlwind of her mother’s arms, the smell of alcohol, and the sickly sweet floral scent of her perfume. Her mother had released her quickly, talking excitedly about her call to the principal wherein the Buchanans would be vindicated once again. Jane had sat on the sofa, letting the afternoon sparkle die.

In the bar, Corina slammed the journal onto the table. “Let’s go see him, now.”

“Who?”

“Walter Bronson, biology professor and sex slave,” Corina said.

Around Jane, the bar spun. When she closed her eyes, the lights from the beer signs made ragged imprints behind her eyelids. The journal had been hers, all hers. Corina punched her on the shoulder.

“Hey Jane, come on, let’s go.” Corina pushed herself up from the chair.

“Why? I thought we were going to talk about Sheldon. This Walter Bronson guy didn’t do anything to us.” She held her hand out to take the journal from Corina.

Corina ignored her. “I’m going. Do whatever you want.”

“Give me the fucking journal,” she said, her voice controlled.
Corina tossed it onto the table. It slid to a rest by their row of shot glasses. “Take it,” she said and started toward the door.

“Wait up!” Jane folded the journal under her arm, and tried to keep her balance as she followed Corina out the door and into the early evening with its lid of dark clouds.

They walked in silence to Walter Bronson’s office. Outside the double doors that opened onto the hallway of biology professors’ offices, Jane stopped.

“I don’t know what we’re doing here,” Jane said. “Let’s go back.” She felt like she was in middle school again, being coerced to throw eggs at the ramshackle huts on the edge of town at the insistence of the three girls who had pretended to be her friends for a week.

Corina rubbed Jane’s back in circles. “Don’t worry, sweetie, I got it all under control. We’re just going to give Professor Loverboy the journal, c’est tout.”

They walked through the doors. Walter Bronson’s light was on, but his door was shut. Jane turned back, but Corina grabbed her sleeve and pulled her along. She knocked on the door.

“Yes?” His voice was low and gravelly.

“Dr. Bronson? Dr. Walter Bronson?” she asked through the door.

“Yes, come in,” he said.

Jane hung back, not sure if he had seen her during her almost daily passes by his office. Corina flopped into the chair by his desk like she belonged there. Jane remembered Maria’s descriptions of their lovemaking among the papers; she saw the desk where they had squirmed in such ecstasy. It was like visiting a minor historical landmark.

“What can I do for you ladies?” he asked. “Are you in Bio 102?”

Corina shook her head. “No, nothing so dull as that. We have a present for you.”

Bronson’s face changed—his smile fossilized. “Okay.”

Corina looked over her shoulder. “Give the gentleman his present.”

Jane made no move to find the journal. She stared at Walter Bronson and traced the layer of thinning hair on his head and the wrinkles fanning from his eyes as his smile faded. She shook her head slowly.

“Jane, goddamnit, give the man his gift from Ma-ri-a.” Corina sang the dead woman’s name.

Bronson’s smile disappeared. “What do you want, ladies?” He looked back and forth between the two of them.

“A little goddam respect,” Corina said.

Bronson and Jane shared a moment of puzzlement. Corina’s eyes filled with tears. Her lip started to tremble. “Goddamn you and your fucking ivory tower bullshit. You think you can just use us to feel better about your horrible, failed lives, you think we are so in awe of your stupid research and your publications and blah, blah, blah. It’s all such bullshit. You’re all a bunch of frustrated old men who can’t find anybody your own age to impress so you mine this litter of kittens.” Corina shook her head. “Goddamnit.” She quickly sniffed away the tears and looked Bronson straight in the eye.

“You need to leave,” he said. “Now.”
Jane backed away from the office door, slowly, until she was leaning against the double doors. She pushed through the doors and started running down the stairs, the sound of her footsteps a thunderous echo in the stairwell. She heard Corina’s voice call after her—a confused “Jane”—moments before she punched through the ground floor doors and raced down the street.

Fog clogged the post-rush hour streets. Micro-raindrops coated Jane’s burning lungs with cold. Her dress caught between her legs and pulled at the seams, threatening to rip, but she ran without looking behind her, without checking for Corina, without worrying about the foolish figure she cut in the early Portland evening. The voice was gone now, no tug of “Ricky,” or “Walter,” only the gush of blood sounding in her ears as her heartbeat raced higher and higher, a moment of pure Jane. If only she could keep running.

Ahead of her, in the intersection where she had taken the journal two weeks ago stood a crowd of thirty people holding candles and humming. Jason, the dead Maria’s boyfriend, was in the middle standing on a riser. He seemed to read from the same script as he did in the news stories. Maria was a good person; he was changed forever. Jane stopped when she reached the crowd. She hugged the journal to her chest. To give the journal to Jason might be a public service: he could move on and stop fixating on his dead girlfriend. Jane could stop this myth of Maria, this lie taking root and festering like a cancer in Jason’s life. She edged her way through the crowd until she stood a few feet from him, words of truth perched on her tongue.

A bus lumbered to the curb beside the group. A blonde woman beamed from her “after” photo on the side of the bus. Susie Greg’s “Welcome to your thin tomorrow” curved around her feathered hair. Jane traced her steps back through the crowd until she reached the bus, her arm poised to pound the woman’s face, but the bus pulled away before she could strike.

“Motherfuckers,” Jane screamed. “Goddamnit!”

Jason’s speech froze in mid-sentence. From beneath the hoods of their coats, members of the crowd stole peeks at Jane, but nobody said anything. The fog turned to drizzle. Jason continued. He thanked the diminishing crowd for their support.

The journal was soggy. Jane flipped the cover open, exposing the ink of the dead woman’s words to the steady fall of rain. She raised her face to the dark sky and closed her eyes against the rain. She imagined a conversation between Susie, Corina, and her mother at the Buchanan family dinner table. The three women were impeccably dressed, their hair in ringlets and their hands glistening with jewels as they sipped wine from crystal goblets. Each woman shared a story that exemplified Jane’s cowardice and foolish dreams. They laughed and clinked glasses. Cheers. Her mother cackled and told the story of Ricky, the test of whether Jane could really love without fear. Susie licked her lips as she shared Jane’s failure to stay slim, and further, the failure of Jane’s “before and after” pictures to connect with the younger demographic. Corina regaled the other two women with her constant but failed attempts to set Jane up with a man. “So goddamned afraid,” Corina said, shaking her head. Maria was there too, a silent partner in their dissection of Jane. Beside them, plastered on the wall, a picture of Jane watched over the proceedings like a caged gorilla.
Jane couldn’t add anything, couldn’t explain. This was how it would be when she died—Jane was sure. There would be no candlelight vigil, no boyfriend extolling her virtues, no one to care about the words that filled her journal.

More people joined the crowd to hear Jason speak about the dangers of cell phone use while driving. They cheered when he announced his intention to campaign this cause into law. The journal had grown waterlogged in Jane’s grasp, the words on the page a blur. Jane felt a tap on her shoulder. She opened her eyes. Corina.

“I’m a freak,” Corina said.

Jane turned. A heaviness descended on her limbs, erasing the momentary sense of lightness that coursed through her when she fled Walter Bronson’s office. The chill seeped through her dripping clothes. She returned to her flooded house of a body, the interior rearranged almost beyond recognition and coated in grit, but still standing all the same. She opened her mouth to speak but found no words.

Corina locked her arm through Jane’s. “Let’s go to your house and smoke cigarettes,” she said in a soothing voice, as if she were a mother offering hot cocoa.

Jane nodded. Corina had come after her. She almost hadn’t expected that she would. Her voice returned, scratchy and quiet. “Sounds good.”

“Poor guy.” Corina tilted her head in the direction of Jason. She lifted the journal from Jane’s hands. “Do you really want this thing?”

Jane grabbed it back from her. A clump of pages tore off in Corina’s hand. Jane unhooked her arm from Corina’s and walked to the trash can on the corner. She curled the journal into a tight “O” and shoved it through the small metal opening at the center. She was glad not to see it slumming among the soda cans, newspapers, and paper coffee cups, or she might have been tempted to rescue it.

“Don’t you ever abandon me like that again,” Corina said, wrapping her hand around Jane’s arm and pulling her close again.

Jane wanted to rake her fingers through the sopping strands of Corina’s hair, to wipe away the beads of rain clinging to her long eyelashes, to primp and pose Corina like she was a doll. She looked so beautiful in the rain. Her beauty took a new shape, one that felt like it was for Jane alone.

Corina’s grip strengthened. Her fingers dug into Jane’s thick biceps. “Jane.” Her voice was insistent.

“I could never leave you,” Jane cooed, hating the soft slither of her mother’s voice in her own.
“Your dogs is prejudice,” the kid said. He was speaking to my brother and me as if chatting with friends about the weather. I knew the word prejudice dripped venom when black people said it. So how he said it surprised me as much as his arrival behind our house in the thin shade of palm trees. No black kid had ventured up our long driveway in the two years since we’d moved to Florida in 1961. We didn’t know any black kids, and I didn’t remember seeing anyone black in New Hampshire. I was thinking about this and trying to figure out what to say to the kid. He stared at Dan and me, and I took the crease in his otherwise smooth forehead as a sign of concentration.

“Don’t make no sense, them black dogs hatin’ colored folks,” he said. This was true. We didn’t understand why our two Labrador retrievers had chased every black person who dared pass our house. Just as baffling was why they let this black stranger pedal up here on his bike, a dented and rusted wreck except for the gleaming angel-wing handlebars that he could barely reach. Rogue and Sadie were curled up at his feet, panting in the steam-bath of spring. The dogs went wherever we went. If we swam, the dogs swam. If we ran through the endless rows of orange groves out back, they ran ahead of us. Now Rogue and Sadie acted as if they belonged to this kid. He was waiting for us to say something, but the only sound was wind through the palms. I wanted to ask what kind of voodoo he’d worked. The kid reached down and scratched Rogue on the neck where the jet-black coat was thick and lustrous. Rogue wagged his tail and looked up at him. It was how Rogue usually looked at me. In his wet brown eyes I saw a smile.

The kid kept twisting his hands back and forth on the handlebar grips like he was riding a bad-ass chopper on the highway. The sleeves of his white t-shirt were rolled up to his shoulders in neat symmetrical folds, and his cutoff jeans were frayed. He looked a few years younger than us, and I suspected the growth spurt gripping Dan and me lurked just around the corner for him. He was ten, maybe eleven years old, but already muscled. His age didn’t matter, seeing how he enlarged himself with words and gestures. “Man, y’all is whiter than bread,” he said. “Y’all is so white I need my shades.” From a faded canvas bag slung over his shoulder he pulled out wrap around sunglasses with mirrored lenses. He lifted them toward his face with both hands, slow and deliberate as if executing a maneuver requiring extraordinary precision, then at the last moment set them atop his head. When they were finally in place, I realized I was holding my breath.

We had been playing basketball when we heard him coming. Our dogs had been barking down by the lake road in front of our house. They stopped and there was a sound like a motor—it turned out to be playing cards flapping against bike spokes—and then a voice. The words were indistinct but rhythmic. Dan stopped dribbling. We turned toward the voice, and as the kid came into view we made out what he was saying: “John Henry’s my name, what’s yo’ game?” He chanted this as he rode toward us, the dogs trotting in his wake.
Looking at him now I saw Cassius Clay in miniature. His hair was trimmed short and squared off flattop style. Dark, almond-shaped eyes widened a moment before he spoke, as if signaling to pay attention to whatever came next. His eyes never stopped moving, soaking up everything even as he talked. “Hey man, where yo’ parents at?” he asked, his gaze glancing off me to the garage.

Instead of answering, I asked: “Where’d you get that name? You look kinda small to work for the railroad.” He didn’t laugh but Dan did. I’d heard the folk ballad about John Henry—a steel-driving black man in the 1870s who outworks a steam drill in a railroad-building contest but drops dead in victory. How could anyone not like the legendary John Henry? The idea of doing something heroic, no matter the risk, appealed to me. Maybe that’s why I’d read every Tom Swift and Hardy Boys book I could find.

“Man, I don’t work on no railroad. I’m too smart for that,” John Henry said. “But people gonna remember me just the same. Y’all gonna remember me.” With that he looked up into the palm fronds and sang out in a voice that sounded like a man’s: “You can hear John Henry a mile or more. You can hear John Henry’s hammer ring. Lord, Lord. You can hear John Henry’s hammer ring.”

Dan clapped, not with enthusiasm but in a mocking cadence. John Henry pedaled away to the garage, where the driveway was extra wide, and began riding in tight circles. “I’m from T’ville,” he said, as if this were big news. All the black people, three hundred or so, lived in T’ville, or Tylerville. Many traveled past our house since the road was the shortest route to work in Lakewood, our white town. T’ville was a quarter-mile away on the cove at the end of the lake. On Easter dawns, choir members of the black church congregated at water’s edge. Their hymns drifted along the misty surface and climbed with the sun to our house.

The lake road was dirt through their town. We had traveled it by car with our parents to get to the highway that cut T’ville in half. When it didn’t rain for several days, washboard bumps and ruts would shake and rattle our station wagon like it was coming apart, making teeth chatter in the heat and dust billow up in choking clouds. During tropical downpours the road was a quagmire that reached out and grabbed the car until the tires spun free in a spray of mud. Driving back toward home, we couldn’t miss the welcome sign that announced we were crossing into our town, population 1,023. Even without the sign everyone knew the dividing line between black and white: it was where the asphalt began.

John Henry, still riding in circles, said he traveled that road nearly every day. He didn’t say why, and we didn’t ask. Like other black kids, he’d learned to pedal up a full head of steam just before reaching our place, hoping the dogs would react too late to catch him. At some point he’d decided—or so he claimed—to change things. “I been trainin’ yo’ dogs, you know, talkin’ to them an’ stuff when they chase me. Didn’t take long for them to listen.” He let go of the handlebars but kept riding in circles. He ran his hands over his hair. At first I thought he was preening. Or was he showing off skills he knew we didn’t have? “Now they like me better than you. Pretty soon they won’t be chasin’ colored folks. Betcha fifty cent they won’t. What you say white boys? Y’all got fifty cent?”
Before we could answer, he threw down his bike, snatched the basketball from Dan, and began shooting at the hoop on the garage. After a few minutes he handed me the ball and rode away with a mumbled, “Y’all see me tomorrow.” We never thought we’d see him again.

For two white boys suddenly transplanted to the South, black people were mysterious, and John Henry had only added to the intrigue. When we passed blacks on the road or said hello to the women who fished with cane poles deep in the weeds that ringed the lake, they were tersely polite if they spoke at all—not friendly or unfriendly, but aloof. It was hard not to wonder about them. No one in my family disliked black people, or at least admitted it. We knew we were better off, but coming from the North we felt no responsibility for this disparity, as if our roots absolved us. Before we met John Henry, Mom went through a brief phase of saying nigra, which she picked up from one of her new lady friends. I knew it was a gentrified way of saying nigger, but to me it sounded just as bad. Then one night at the dinner table I blurted out nigger during an argument about politics. The word was thrown around a lot at our all-white school as protest marches popped up in the big cities. That was my excuse. Dad put his hand gently on my shoulder and called me Charlie—usually when I made him mad I was “Charles” and he’d squeeze my shoulder until I winced. He explained why using that word was wrong. He even invoked God’s name although he’d stopped attending church. He didn’t yell, which was odd, and the look in his eyes made me feel small.

It seemed Rogue and Sadie saw something in black people that we didn’t. The moment one walked or bicycled near our property, the dogs would howl like wolves and race down the front yard to the road, fur all bristled up, and stop a few feet from the unlucky traveler. They wouldn’t stop barking and snarling or retreat until the person made it to the neighbors’ property. It was as if our dogs sensed the troubled times in the South and assumed we must not like anyone black. They reminded us of the police dogs Bull Connor was siccing on civil rights marchers in Alabama, only Rogue and Sadie never bit anyone. None of it made sense—our dogs behaving this way or the violent images on the nightly news. It embarrassed us. Sometimes we’d drag them away from their victims and apologize. From one hundred yards they could tell whether a passerby was black or white. Not once did they bother a white person.

John Henry wheeled up on his bike the next afternoon as promised. For a few weeks he showed up nearly every day. We had never known anyone so talkative. He spewed brash words, challenging words. They shot out in rapid bursts with barely a pause between sentences: “Hey man, play me in basketball. Hey man, y’all can’t keep up with me. Hey man, what y’all got to eat? Hey man, y’all got big ears. Hey man, where yo’ mama work?”

Basketball was his emissary. He was good too, though not as good as he pretended. John Henry liked being a one-boy team, liked taking on the two white boys. He used our makeshift basketball court like a stage. Slowly he’d dribble forward, one arm raised and holding up two fingers, telling his invisible team what play to run. Before every free throw,
he’d touch the silver cross hanging from his neck to his lips and tuck it inside his t-shirt. That was John Henry, always making things dramatic.

We had trouble beating him once or twice; he was tough for his size. His strength surprised me the first time I tried to wrestle the ball from him. He was every bit as strong as Dan, who was a year younger than me but stockier. We were nicer than we would have been to a white kid. We figured if we gave John Henry too much crap he might not return and we’d lose our new novelty, our window into the black world. Having him around also made me feel high-minded, superior to my bigoted white friends, not that I’d told them about him. So we let John Henry talk a lot of trash and show off.

His questions never stopped. We didn’t bother answering most of them. I had a lot to ask him that I didn’t because I feared he might not want to reveal how he lived. And I didn’t want to get too close—having a black friend would single me out as strange.

We took a break from a basketball game and went inside to cool off. John Henry began walking from room to room as he often did, with the dogs and us following close behind. He informed us that he didn’t believe in air conditioning because “it ain’t natural.” Then he said, “Hey man, why y’all got two dinner tables?”

“One’s for breakfast and lunch in the kitchen, the other’s for supper in the dining room,” Dan said, his tone telling John Henry that any fool knows this.

“I ain’t talkin’ to you white boy, I’m talkin’ to Charlie.”

“You guys cool it,” I said. “And why are we still in the house? Time for another game.”

“Hey man, why don’t y’all have a Negro woman clean your house? Y’all look plenty rich enough.” He was eyeing me but petting Rogue. He knew our family wasn’t wealthy, but middle-class must have looked appealing. In a hallway John Henry opened a closet and looked inside. In the living room he opened an end table drawer. I pushed it shut. This was not the first time he had poked around too much. But until that moment, I hadn’t realized he was using us like we were using him. It made me wonder what exactly he saw, whether he was telling his friends about how this other half lived in the big place on the lake.

“Okay, we need to get out and play ball,” I said.

“You’s scared yo’ mama’s gonna see me inside, ain’t ya’?”

“How many times do I got to tell you, John Henry? She don’t care.”

Right away the game became something else. John Henry kept driving to the basket, bulling his way through us. Dan was letting his elbows whip around on rebounds. We began fouling John Henry every time he touched the ball but denied it when he protested. He and Dan started arguing, tough talk that escalated to screams. Veins in Dan’s neck bulged out. John Henry clenched his fists. Then Dan shoved John Henry, and he pushed back harder. “Fuck you, white boy,” he said. John Henry cocked his head back and narrowed his eyes. He was up on his toes, stretching himself to look bigger. Neither had a shirt on and their bodies shined with sweat. Dan, a few inches taller, stood chest-to-chest with him, white skin against black skin, glaring a silent but clear message: don’t fuck with this white boy. I tried to step between them but neither budged.
“Don’t need this shit,” John Henry finally said, turning quickly toward his bike and pedaling away. He shouted something unintelligible as he headed toward T’ville. It was as if we had taken both sides as far as we could, given what was swirling through the South. Or maybe we had learned as much as we wanted to learn about each other and decided to move on.

Occasionally we’d see John Henry riding past on the lake road, acting as if he didn’t know us or had never been inside our house. Rogue and Sadie didn’t chase him but followed next to his bike like escorts.

Sadie didn’t chase anyone after Rogue went missing. One day, a month after John Henry stormed off, Rogue just wasn’t there. And as hard as we looked and called his name, there was no sign of him. After a week, we pretty much gave up. Messing around in the grove, I still expected to see him come running up. In the middle of the night I’d reach down from my bed to pet him. Sadie hardly left the house, spending most of her time under the kitchen table. Mom mentioned getting another dog, but I knew she didn’t mean it.

Dan and I were moping at the kitchen table after school, staring out the window and ignoring the homework spread out before us. Sadie was under the table. I rubbed my bare feet against her back and her fur pushed between my toes. Both dogs used to flop down there and never minded serving as foot rests. After a while Sadie roused, went to the back door, and whined. I heard the squeal of a bicycle braking, and then someone yelling.

“I seen him! I seen him!” It was John Henry.

“What do you want?” I said through the screen door.

He opened it and pulled me out by the arm. “Hey man, I seen Rogue. He’s tied up in this man’s yard. I’ll show you.”

“How do you know it’s him?” I said. John Henry looked bigger, and I was wary of what he might be up to. Dan watched us through the door.

“Hey man, y’all want your dog back or don’t ya? It’s him. No lie, man!”

I looked at Dan. He nodded.

Our bikes jolted hard where the asphalt became dirt. To keep from bogging down in deep sand, we stayed in the center of the road. Dan and I had never walked or biked through T’ville. We followed close behind John Henry. I saw a row of wooden houses—old and worn, but with yards that were trimmed and tidy. People on the porches gawked at us, and a woman in a rocking chair stood up and shouted something. She looked angry, and I wondered whether we should have waited for Dad to come home. John Henry waved and smiled, a gesture I interpreted as “Everything’s okay. The white boys are with me.”

We crossed the two-lane highway onto a path that led beneath a canopy of oak trees. Spanish moss draped from them in tangled gray beards. The afternoon sun illuminated dust in the air. John Henry was pedaling fast. He glanced over his shoulder and hollered at us to keep up. He swerved onto a dirt road, this one barely wide enough for one car but lined with more small houses. Some places had vegetables growing in the front yards. A black-faced scarecrow peeked out of tall corn. Yellow hibiscus blooms draped
over a chain-link fence in front of one house. At another the porch sagged like the backbone of a plow mule. Two little girls in white shorts, wearing curlicues of red ribbon in their hair, squatted next to the road. They were digging with sticks until they saw us and ran. Somewhere meat was cooking. I had no idea so many people lived this close to us, but so far out of sight. It was another world, alive but hidden.

I heard the first bark behind us, and then more off to the right. From somewhere two dogs raced after us, growling between each bark. Their paws made a sound in the dirt, like a scratchy drumbeat. I caught a glimpse of one just off my back wheel. Pedaling furiously to escape them, we swerved right on another dirt street, and they abruptly stopped running but kept barking. We were moving deeper into the town, and I felt as if everyone in T’ville knew we were there. I wanted to rescue Rogue, but I was afraid we wouldn’t make it.

Up ahead next to a towering pine, another dog barked and paced next to the road, waiting. He lunged as we approached, and I knew this time there would be no escape. But he jerked back to earth. He paused for a second, and surprise crossed his face as if he had forgotten the rope tied to his collar. Then he resumed lunging and barking, flecks of drool flying out. I thought about turning back but knew what John Henry would say.

Now riding between Dan and me, he laughed suddenly even though he was panting to catch his breath. Not just a chuckle but a belly laugh like someone had told him one hell of a joke.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“They dogs never bother me,” John Henry said. “And I ride here every day.”

He raced ahead of us again. Dan and I looked at each other. We turned another corner and there was Rogue, whimpering and straining at the end of a thin chain in the middle of an overgrown yard. Rogue seemed unsure whether to bark or wag his tail. His coat had lost some luster but his eyes were bright.

“Now y’all believe me, white boys?” John Henry wasn’t smiling.

I started to untie Rogue but heard voices in the house. John Henry’s eyes opened wider than I’d ever seen. “Y’all best be gettin’ outta here. Right now! Come on back with yo’ daddy and his car.” I started to thank him but he was already moving toward his bike and waving for us to follow.

That evening at dusk, Dad bumped the station wagon over the road to T’ville. He drove faster than usual. I sat up front, and Dan in back. Dad wanted to know where John Henry was, and I told him that he followed us as far as the highway and said he had to head home. Dad pulled up slowly in front of the house and told us to stay in the car. The engine made a ticking sound as it cooled, and our sweaty legs stuck to the vinyl seats.

Dad walked into the yard and trudged through parched weeds. Mom had told him to call the dog pound and let them handle it. He knelt beside Rogue, stroked his face with both hands, and began working to untie the chain from his collar. He wasn’t hurrying like I wanted him to.

I heard the screen door open. A man wearing blue coveralls stained with black streaks appeared on the porch. He watched but said nothing. A toothpick danced from one
side of his mouth to the other and back again. I was afraid there might be trouble. The man began tapping the toe of an unlaced work boot, not fast like he was nervous but once every few seconds. Rogue was shaking now. Dad gave up on the chain. He unbuckled the collar, and the dog tags rattled as they fell to the ground. Not once did Dad look up.

I opened the door, and Rogue jumped in with me. He was still shaking but licked my face. I remembered his smell. The screen door creaked again. I looked up into the fading gray light, and just inside the door stood someone, a boy, watching.
The cat didn’t come back and neither did Paul. Janie paced the apartment. Her chest felt tight, constricted as if she were holding her breath under deep water. She wanted to run and scream, or do something bad to somebody, but not necessarily to Paul. She wished she knew where that black-haired girl lived. That’s where Paul was.

When she got back from her weekend at Stella’s, Paul wasn’t home. Janie had gone to their bedroom to put her clothes away and had found a pair of panties peeking out from under the bed. She’d never met the black-haired girl, but Janie knew of her from other people. She was some new girl in town with deep pockets and a drug habit as bad as Paul’s. Paul said he was just her connection, and Janie had believed it until the black bikini-style panties—expensive and not hers—showed up.

Janie ripped the sheets from the bed and carried them down to the basement laundry. She poured in extra soap and bleach to get rid of the smell of another woman in her bed. She scrubbed the tub twice, poured bleach in the toilet and down the sink. She looked hard in the bathroom mirror—blue eyes, pink-rimmed from crying so hard, long brown hair, wild as snakes.

Janie was remaking the bed when she heard the key in the lock. She was in his face before he could take off his coat.

“Tell me I’m wrong, Paul. Tell me you didn’t fuck that bitch in my bed.”

Paul finger-combed the honey-colored hair away from his eyes and held his hand up. “What are you talking about?”

“I found these under the bed.” She threw the panties at him. “These are not mine, Paul.”

“Debby was over here and she took a nap while we were waiting to cop some wire at Jeff’s.”

“Bullshit. That’s bullshit. Do you see STUPID tattooed on my forehead? Because I can’t believe you’re telling me that a speed queen like her would nap while she was waiting to cop.”

Paul shrugged his shoulders. “Look, do you think I’d bring her up here if I was screwing her? It’s just business, Jane. I love you. I’m just trying to make some money off her. Money for us.”

“If she was just napping, why’d she take her panties off?”

Paul shook his head and shrugged again. “Who knows with a bitch like her? I won’t bring her up here unless you’re around. Okay?” Paul looked her in the eyes and opened his arms to her. “I don’t want to fight anymore. Trust me, Jane. She’s nothing to me but a paycheck and a quarter ounce.”

Janie followed Paul to the bedroom. When he started explaining things to her they sounded right, or maybe she just wanted to believe him. Not believing would cost her more than she had. He sat on the edge of the bed and untied his workboots. Stretching
out, he caught her hand and pulled her down next to him. She lay beside him, still and quiet. She wanted to believe him.

His breathing slowed, and she turned on her side to study him. He looked like an old alley cat these days. She could imagine him with an ear torn loose, ribs showing, a coat of rough, patchy fur. Speed was hard on him, but he wouldn’t cut it loose. At least he kept himself clean, she thought as she brushed away his long hair and curled into the hollow of his arm. She breathed him in—Camel Straights, pot, Budweiser, Ivory soap.

She never bought Ivory soap.

Paul kept his eyes closed and his body motionless, willing himself to at least rest if sleep wasn’t possible. Little white dots traveled across the backs of his eyelids, moving of their own volition. The meth bugs didn’t drive him crazy, but the constant high-pitched hum that grew louder the longer he went without sleep did. He had to get hold of some good pharmaceutical downers so he could get some sleep. Maybe Dilantin or a few Percodans, or his favorite—morphine sulfate. Hard to get, but so worth it.

Paul stayed still through the night, holding Janie like a small, durable life raft. How long since he had slept? Days, maybe a week, maybe more. His body jerked occasionally when he began to creep to the edge of real sleep. Paul squeezed his eyes shut to relieve the burning feeling, and then opened them to look at the digital clock. The pale green scoreboard flipped to 5:45. Not too early to get up and ready for work. He slipped out of bed without waking Janie. He picked up Debby’s panties from the hallway floor and threw them in the garbage. He couldn’t believe she’d left them here. He knew she did it on purpose. He couldn’t believe he was still fucking her—taking her money, taking her body, taking her drugs. But he meant what he said to Janie. He loved her, and he wasn’t going to lose her over this. Life had become a high-wire act.

He grabbed a Coke from the refrigerator, hoping it would settle his stomach. Beyond the window, a pale, watery sun rose behind rain clouds, giving the apartment complex a look of despair. Janie had a book by the bed—Bleak House. That’s where they lived right now. Bleak house. Paul picked up his keys and headed to work. Today was payday. That was something anyway.

Janie pushed a thumbtack through a battered Queen of Hearts, nailing it firmly to the open door. The cat bounded in to get out of the cold. Fog was freezing to everything, and the sidewalks and streets looked slick and shiny. Late afternoon had turned a silvery gray, and night was creeping up. Paul had been gone for three days. She was trying to call him home with a playing card. She hoped for a little magic, a little divine intervention from a Las Vegas–approved playing card.

A Fistful of Dollars was on TV. Janie turned up the volume so she could hear it from the kitchen as she cooked a box of macaroni and cheese. She hoped mayonnaise could substitute for milk and butter. They had neither. At first, when she heard the knocking, she thought it was Clint Eastwood shooting up the town. When it continued she went to the door and peeked out the peephole. Under the dim bulb stood a young woman
with black hair. Janie unlocked and opened the door, willing her heart to slow down. “Yeah?”

“Have you seen Paul?” The woman fidgeted with a dozen jangly bracelets on her skinny white wrist. She was dressed all in black. A leather coat flapped open revealing a long, diaphanous black skirt and a Danskin leotard. Her long black hair was pulled back tight in a ponytail, making her face round and white like the moon.

Janie pulled her bathrobe closer to her body and stepped out of the doorway, letting the woman inside. “Haven’t seen him. I thought he was with you.”

The woman laughed harshly like a crow barking. “I didn’t think you could be as stupid as he said. You’re Janie.” She put her hand out to shake. Janie just watched and offered nothing. “I’m Debby.” She put her hand down. “He took off with my money on Friday. He hasn’t called or nothing.”

Janie shrugged. “You might as well sit down.” Janie had learned to be quiet, not give herself away. Paul always said she knew how to hold her mug. This was the proof. She perched on the edge of the couch and watched Debby.

Debby fumbled through her leather bag, pulled out a cigarette, and lit it. Janie waited for a minute. “So, how much money did you give him?”

“Seven forty-five.”

“Seven hundred and forty-five dollars?”

“Yeah. It’s my dad’s money. He’s out of town. Paul said he could double the money and we’d get wired.”

“That’s a lot of money. He might not be back for a while. You got any pot?” Janie never smoked pot. With Paul going off the deep end, somebody had to be in control. It occurred to her that she might be somebody all on her own.

Debby opened a small gold cigarette case and took out a joint. She handed it to Janie. “I’m going to be so fucked if I can’t replace that money before my dad gets back.”

Janie took a hit, held her breath, and let her mind go blank for a minute. Her heart felt like a block of ice, and there were no more tears to hold back. She was the Ice Queen.

“When does he get back?”

“Not until next week. Man, what am I going to do? I don’t know anybody but Paul. I don’t have any connections. Just him.”

Janie smiled, Ice Queen–style. “Me. You’ve got me.”

Janie followed Debby through garbage-scented fog to the car parked in Paul’s space. The few lights working in the parking lot sputtered on. A small animal scuttled out of the overflowing dumpster and headed for the weeds that edged the lot. It was the first time Janie had really looked at it—the rust-colored box crammed full and overflowing with the refuse of a thousand lives. Disposable diapers, crumpled shopping bags of stinking cat litter, a broken tricycle, putrefying remnants of government cheese and food stamp leftovers, a urine-soaked mattress. Debby unlocked the driver’s side of her black Camaro and slid across to unlock the passenger side. Janie got in and shut the door.

They drove as the streetlights blinked on just ahead of them, down Market and off
Summer, to a tree-lined street that would be beautiful come fall or spring, in a neighborhood full of big, old houses. Debby pulled into the driveway of a light gray house with dark gray trim sitting on top of a slight rise. Manicured hedges and perfectly trimmed trees stood like sentinels on the ocean of sloping lawn that ran to the street.

Janie followed Debby to the porch and watched as she punched a few keys on a panel of numbered buttons and opened the front door. In her life Janie had never seen so much wealth piled up so high in one place. The black leather living room furniture sat on pristine plush white carpet. The end tables were made of glass and chrome. Through half-shut double doors she caught a glimpse of a formal dining room with a gleaming table and eight chairs. A crystal chandelier hung above it like something from a movie. In the marble-tiled foyer, a curved staircase led to the second floor. Debby took the stairs two at a time, dumping her bag and coat on the way. The rooms were bare of little personal things, like the photographs and knick-knacks that a family would have. It felt barren, like an anonymous hotel room. Janie stood still for a minute calculating the kind of money that bought all this.

Debby called down from the top of the stairs. “Come on up. I’ve got to pee. There’s a phone up here.”

Debby’s room looked like a picture in a decorating magazine. Everything matched—white and gold French-style furniture. The perfectly made bed had a canopy. Ruffled linens hung to the floor. By the closet, a vanity with a big oval mirror had a few decorative perfume bottles arranged on it. The only signs of Debby were a small mirror with the residue of white powder clinging to it, a rolled bill, an open tube of strawberry lip gloss, and an empty baggie lying beside the mirror. The bedroom had its own bathroom, and Debby sat on the toilet peeing loudly, surrounded by pink throw rugs, pink towels, pink and white-striped wallpaper.

Janie couldn’t keep the awe out of her voice. “How’s your dad make the money to buy all this?”

“Oh, this is nothing like we had when we lived in Pacific Palisades. Before the divorce and all that.” Debby flushed and stood at the sink, washing her hands with flowery soap. “Salem is such a hole, but Daddy was scared I’d relapse and Mom is definitely out of the picture, so he moved us here to Bumfuck, Oregon. The middle of nowhere.”

“Why don’t you just leave? How old are you anyway?”

“I’m twenty-three, but that’s got nothing to do with it.” She gestured to the room. “I’m Daddy’s little girl. Why would I leave? You want to see his room? I’ve got to hit the bank anyway. You can use the phone in there.”

Thick burgundy drapes, pulled shut across a wall of windows, kept out the thin strand of light from the porch below. Cigarette smoke, stale sweat, and perfume clung to the disheveled sheets and blankets on the king-sized bed. Empty glasses and filled ashtrays were on the floor. This was obviously where Debby slept. Maybe Paul too. Janie erased the maybe and carried over the anger like she was doing a multiplication problem.

Debby pulled a painting away from the wall, exposing a small safe hidden behind it. She dialed the lock back and forth without any hesitation. From inside she pulled out an
envelope stuffed full of bills. She thumbed through them like she was shuffling cards. “Here’s the thing. Are you going to be able to get me a good deal? And can I trust you?”

Janie waited a minute until her voice was tight and level. “I’m going to get you another connection, Debby, because when this is over, I never want to see you again, or hear you’ve been with my old man. I’ll help you move it, if you want, because I know this whole damn valley. You might make back at least part of your dad’s money. And I won’t be jacking up the price to make a profit off you like Paul does. We clear?”

Debby handed her a slim black phone. “I’m going to hop in the shower. No long distance. Nothing my dad will see on the bill. Okay?”


He picked up on the third ring. “Yup?”

“Jeff, It’s Janie.”

“Your old man just left. I imagine he’s a bit peeved with me.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yup. Told him only salvation is free in this fucking world.”

“Well, I’m not calling about Paul. I got a friend you’d like to meet.”

“Oh yeah? Is this friend female and fine?”

“Paul seemed to think so.”

He hooted. “So, that’s how it is! You know the old bible verse don’t you? Vengeance is mine sayeth the Lord.”

“And paybacks are a motherfucker. Look, you want to meet or not?”

“Oh, I definitely want to meet. Give me half an hour. See you at the Flight.”

“Make it Denny’s on 99.”

At seven Debby and Janie pulled into the parking lot at the Denny’s in Woodburn. They sat across from each other in a booth by the window, watching for Jeff. He pulled in driving a dirty white Buick and circled the parking lot twice before he parked.

Janie dipped a french fry in ketchup and nodded at his car. “He’s here.”

“How come he doesn’t just park?”

“Jeff likes to think he’s Starsky. Or Hutch. The blond one. He watches too many cop shows.”

Jeff got out of the car, dragged a comb through his long, whitish blond hair, and stuck the comb in the back pocket of his tight black Levi’s.

Debby looked him over. “Looks kind of like Johnny Winter.”

“Yeah. He likes to think that too.”

Jeff found them and slid into the booth next to Janie.

“Jeff, this is Debby.” Janie took a bite of her grilled cheese sandwich and washed it down with a gulp of Coke.

Debby leaned forward across the table, pushing her breasts together to form a canyon of cleavage. “So, you’re Jeff. Janie says maybe we could do some business.”

Jeff shot Janie a look from the top of his shades. She caught the look but shrugged and kept eating.
He took a cigarette from the pack in his jacket pocket. Debby leaned closer, lighting it. He cupped his hand around hers and inhaled the smoke, looking at Debby over the top of his mirrored shades. “Finish eating, and we’ll see what we can do.”

When they left Denny’s an hour later, ice had begun to form on the edges of puddles. Janie’s cheeks felt stiff with cold. The winter so far had been wet and warmer than usual. Today it felt like winter, or she did. She crawled in the back seat of Jeff’s car, pushing aside beer cans and burger wrappers, clearing a space to sit. Debby sat next to Jeff in the front. He drove the back roads out of town, did a stint on the freeway, then doubled back the long way, all the time talking loudly above ZZ Top on the radio. Janie didn’t even pretend to listen. She’d heard this same old shit from every two-bit dealer she’d ever met, and they were all busted eventually. Usually over something radically stupid. Like the guy who called the cops on his neighbor’s barking dog when he was tweaking and got busted with a house full of drugs and guns. Janie pushed her face against the cold window and watched as the scenery flashed by. They were outside of town where the houses thinned out and grew unkempt and shabby.

Jeff edged the volume down as they pulled onto a rutted gravel road. “I told you Paul might be by later?”

“That’s cool.” Janie didn’t flinch. Her voice was a cold breeze.

Debby grumbled. “He better have my money.”

Jeff and Janie laughed.

Jeff shut off the motor in front of his house. No other houses were close by. A group of spindly trees partially hid it from view of the main road. Two huge Rottweilers charged the car, barking and leaping around frantically. Jeff turned to Janie. “You going to cut his throat?”

“If I can.”

“Man, I’m glad you’re not my old lady. But shit, you two can go round and round. I don’t care as long as I get my money up front.”

Debby piped up. “It’s my money.”

Jeff looked at her, all dealer. “But they’re my drugs, darling.”

Debby giggled.

Jeff opened the car door and kicked at the dogs to shut them up. He gave Janie a hand as she struggled out of the back, her foot asleep. He smiled at her while Debby got out of her side of the car and walked a few yards to the front door. “She’s going to be fun for a while. A regular roller coaster ride. Hours of entertainment.”

Janie nodded, grabbed her bag. “I was hoping you’d feel that way.”

The house had the cranked-up smell of cat piss and aluminum that Janie had grown accustomed to. The baseboard heater didn’t work. Jeff turned on a space heater in the middle of the living room. Janie waited with Debby on the couch while Jeff disappeared into a distant back room to get a bag of fresh powder. The windows had old faded dime store tapestries hung as curtains—dogs playing poker, a gypsy girl dancing, Elvis in his famous white jumpsuit, Jesus at the Last Supper. The walls were water-stained and pocked with a few stray bullet holes. Jeff liked to sit in the dark and shoot rats when he was wired.
On the banged-up maple coffee table were a handgun, a copy of Hustler, a rolling tray with a lighter, and a small bong shaped like a naked woman.

Jeff came out carrying a baggie full of white powder. He tossed it to Janie. “You want a taste?”

Debby grabbed the bag. “Yeah! How many times I got to tell you it’s my money—my gig.”

Jeff shook his head. “Let’s get this straight, Debby, darling. Without Janie you wouldn’t be here. You’re only here because Janie brought you and I agreed to meet you. I’m only dealing with you because I know Janie. I don’t fucking know you from a fucking Jack-in-the-box. Got it?”

Jeff gave Debby a coke spoon filled with the powder. She snorted it in one nostril, refilled from the bag, and then snorted into the other. Jeff had a taste too, but Janie just watched. There was a fair amount of coughing and snorting and a trip to the kitchen for water.

Debby flushed beet red and went out to the porch for a minute. When she came back she was tightly wound—spring driven, loaded. “Let’s do it.”

Jeff had an ounce of some French powdered baby laxative to cut the meth with. Some people cut their crank with baking powder because baby powder had too strong a smell, though the ladies seemed to like it. His dope would produce a good high and prevent constipation. Janie listened while he told her how to cut the dope on the mirror with a brand new razor blade; how to weigh it out on the triple beam minus the weight of the bag; how to bag it up properly in the little baggies he made himself with his mom’s old Seal-A-Meal.

At ten, Janie and Debby left Jeff’s. Tonight would be long. They would drive the backroads through all the small towns between Salem and Portland, maybe twice by morning, until Janie had sold dope to every person Paul knew for five dollars less than Paul did. By the time she was done, Paul wouldn’t be able to sell a gram of anything to anyone. She would cut his throat good.

They stopped at Perry’s. Janie needed a good first customer to make it happen. Somebody who liked her a little more than they liked Paul. If anybody would buy dope from her, it would be Perry. She told Debby to wait in the car.

Perry answered the door in his blue V.A. hospital bathrobe. He held a pipe in one hand behind a tall can of beer. His pale, drooping mustache seemed to run downhill off the edge of his chin. For a Few Dollars More was on the TV. He sat down in his recliner, tilting it back so the footrest popped up. The underwater glow of his big aquarium made the room peaceful and sleepy. Perry handed her a beer from a small cooler by his chair. She took a drink.

“I wasn’t expecting visitors. Thought it’d be just me and Clint.”

“I’ve got a bunch of crystal I need to get rid of.”

“You got it on you?”

“Yeah. I can give you an eighth for twenty-five.”

“What’s Paul going to say about this? I mean, I wouldn’t want to get you in
trouble—

“I’m in trouble no matter what I do.”

“You’d always have a place here. If you wanted.”

Janie bent down and kissed his cheek. “Thanks Perry. What I want to know now is this—do you want to buy an eighth, or a quarter? I could do fifty for a quarter, and that’s cheap.”

“Let me get my wallet.”

Janie sold him a quarter, pocketed five dollars, and put the rest in her purse to give to Debby later. They drove for hours, stopping every few minutes at another house or apartment. Debby waited in the car with the heater running and the radio tuned to KSPM’s all-night rock show. Janie ran in and out of homes turning over dope as fast as she could. Somewhere out in the night Paul was trying to get somebody to front him an ounce until he could sell it and replace all that money. Impossible to do. Janie knew all the places he knew, and she got there first.

By three on Saturday morning, they were back at Jeff’s cutting up another ounce. Jeff and Debby were in the kitchen doing lines on a dirty mirror under an exposed lightbulb that hung in the middle of the room like a spotlight. Janie watched them kiss. Debby leaned into Jeff, her hands crawling under his jacket and down his back. Jeff pawed at her skirt, pulling open her jacket. A white flash of skin and his mouth. Janie watched them, knowing in a month or two—maybe three if Debby was lucky—Jeff would be done with her, and she would be more strung out than even she could imagine. Debby would be like the other speed queens Paul occasionally dealt with—the sad-eyed bitter women with pockmarked faces and rotten teeth, emaciated and looking fifty when they were twenty-five. They always reminded her of witches, cackling laughter with no joy, rinsed-out lives and no hope left. She’d wanted to teach Paul a lesson and get rid of Debby once and for all. She’d done that, but there was no pleasure here. No glimpse of green.

A car pulled up outside, setting off the dogs. Jeff came out of the kitchen with a .357 in his hand. He pulled the Elvis curtain away from the window and peered out. “Party’s over, Janie. Your old man’s here.” He unlocked the door, opening it wide to the night. “Man, I can’t believe it. It’s snowing.”

It was cold now. Winter. Large white flakes drifted down from a luminous silver night sky. Not one or two, but thousands piling up, around and on top of one another as they met the solidity of what lay beneath. Even now, in the rectangle of perfect light cast from the open door, all was concealed, obscured, softened, hidden. Janie walked out the door to Paul’s car, throwing a handful of bills behind her like confetti. It was cold now. Winter. It might snow all night.
Sheila opens the screen door and steps outside with a blue pitcher of pink lemonade and a stack of gold tin glasses.

“It’s hot enough out here to fry eggs on the sidewalk,” she calls out to the girls jumping rope in the middle of the street.

“We aren’t eggs,” her daughter Rose replies. Susie loses the rhythm of her jumping and the girls stop chanting their rope-jumping rhyme. Rose is twelve, but the defiance in her voice goes far deeper than hormones. “Why are you out here, anyway?”

Sheila treads carefully. “It’s summer. Time to feel the sun.”

“So now you’ve felt it. It’s my turn to jump. I don’t want you watching.”

“I can out-jump you,” Sheila lets a hint of defiance roll off her tongue, too. It’s a new sensation. Rusty. Pure. Raw. All at the same time. “And when I do, you have to fry an egg on the sidewalk.”

“Says who?”

“No. And I’m still your mother. No matter what.” She sets the pitcher and glasses down on the steps and moves toward the center of the ropes. Molly and Susie each hold one end.

Rose steps closer to Sheila, her hands squarely on her hips. “A mother who wants to fry eggs on the sidewalk? What kind of mother is that?”

Rose’s friends want to laugh, but they don’t know at what. What’s so funny, anyway? Rose’s mother jumping rope? Frying an egg on a sidewalk? Rose’s mother thinking she can out-jump Rose who everybody knows is the best rope jumper around? Maybe it’s just plain funny that Rose is bold enough to sass her mother in front of them and all the neighbors sitting on the lawn chairs pulled up under the trees that line the sidewalk. Everybody is listening, but Rose doesn’t care.

The girls twirl the ropes two at a time. Sheila steps in front of her daughter, picks up the rhythm, and jumps in. The girls begin with a simple rhyme even a mother would know.

Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear, turn around,
Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear, touch the ground.
Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear, show your shoe—

The girls laugh when Sheila sticks out her bare foot.

“You don’t have shoes on,” Rose says.

“Neither did the Teddy Bear,” she scoffs and goes back to the rhyme, pretending to climb stairs.

Her husband left notes. He started leaving them from the day after they were married. She was the first one in her high school class to say “I do.” The day after
graduation. They hadn’t had time for a honeymoon because Peter had to go out of town on a sales trip. He had graduated six years ahead of her and was building his career in insurance. He traveled a lot. There were only so many people in a little Pennsylvania town willing to buy life insurance. Even fewer who wanted homeowner’s insurance. You had to own a home for that, and not a lot of people in town could claim their home as their own in 1962.

So the day after their wedding, Peter had left a note telling his lovely bride he’d had a lovely time on their lovely wedding night and they’d have more lovely times when he returned. She’d blushed and gathered up the sheets, and despite the awkwardness and his rush the night before, it had indeed been a lovely time. She’d drunk his kisses as if she’d been dying of thirst.

Susie chooses the next rhyme. Sheila doesn’t miss a beat.

I went down town, to see Miss Brown.
She gave me a nickel, to buy a pickle.
The pickle was sour so she gave me a flower
The flower was black so she gave me a smack
The smack was hard so she gave me a card.
And on the card it said—

Sheila doesn’t pay attention to what Miss Brown’s card says as she spins through the air and slaps the pavement automatically. She’s jumped to this rhyme hundreds of times. She barely hears the words. Instead, she’s remembering the first smack.

It was a game, Peter had later insisted. She’d told him it wasn’t one she cared to play again and he’d agreed. He’d been terribly sorry and had bought her a beautiful silk scarf with a flock of butterflies flying across the sky blue background.

But Peter couldn’t keep his mind off games, and his next one was worse. It didn’t hurt as much because he just tied her up with her new scarf. At first it’d been fun because he’d kissed her all over until she thought she’d die of pleasure. She imagined that the butterflies had flown off the silky fabric and had landed all over her body, electrifying it with the excitement of being freed from the tightly woven threads that had held them captive.

But Peter had left her that way for over eight hours, telling her if she yelled one more time for him to untie her, he would gag her with the dishrag. Her throat burned with bile at the thought of the wrinkled cloth scratching her mouth, leaking bits of grease onto her tongue. She stopped pleading. The next day, he was amazed she hadn’t liked that game either.

“You’re a hard woman to please, Mrs. Bernard,” he’d told her, rubbing lotion into her sore wrists gently, his voice as soft as his smile was sweet. “But poker—there’s a game everybody likes.”
Molly chooses the next rhyme. Sheila’s never imagined that plain Molly with the buck teeth might be one of those rare people with the power to read minds, but who could tell just by looking at someone what powers they might secretly possess? Maybe the crescent-shaped scar across Molly’s cheek was a clue she’d missed all along.

*Say, say my playmate*
*Come out and play with me*
*And bring your dollies three*
*Climb up my apple tree*
*Slide down my rain barrel*
*Into my cellar door*
*And we’ll be jolly friends*
*For ever more.*

Being locked in the cellar way back when hadn’t been that bad. She and Peter had an ugly fight the night before when she wouldn’t finish the poker game. It had been a wonderful spring day, and she’d spent it planting flower seeds and watching birds bathe in an old plastic swimming pool that she had filled with water to soak the hardened dirt off her gardening tools. She didn’t want the day to be spoiled by another game of poker, but she’d played anyway. What choice did she really have? One way or another, he always got what he wanted.

Peter was a far better poker player than she was, and so she was always naked long before him. To keep the game fun until his own clothes came off, he’d insist that she pull slips of paper out of the cracked dried-up fish bowl. Their one pet had died when the water all leaked out, leaving shiny silver fins dulled to gray against bright pink and orange pebbles.

On each piece of paper he had scrawled something she had to do. Some things weren’t so bad—kissing his feet, for example, as long as they were clean—but she hated it when she pulled out a paper that instructed her to touch herself. More than half of them had some variation on that command. It was embarrassing, no matter how much he liked watching her.

She’d refused to let him take pictures like the piece of paper said, so he’d locked her in the basement.

That command had been mild compared to what he came up with after that. One time she was supposed to use a banana on herself. She had said no. He’d left on a trip the next day and didn’t come back when he was supposed to.

His note had made it seem like everything was fine. “You’re the best sport I know. If poker doesn’t suit you, find something that does.” But he stayed away for twelve days instead of three.

She wouldn’t have minded, but she was pregnant, and he’d only left her enough money to buy food to last the three days he was scheduled to be away. Even when there
was absolutely nothing in the cupboard but flour and cream of tartar, she’d let that banana rot to black, a thick cloud of fruit flies buzzing above it.

She snuck into the neighbor’s garden to pick two zucchinis and a tomato each night for a week—not for herself, but for her unborn child. She sweetened the zucchinis with rose petals from her own rose bush, whispering to the child growing inside her that only royalty had rose-seasoned food.

She dreamed her child would be a girl with rose-red lips and eyes as deep green as zucchini skin. She was right and named her beautiful baby Rose, so fresh and fragrant. Sweet. So perfectly sweet.

Molly chooses her second rhyme.

_Last night, night before, my boyfriend took me to the candy store._

_He bought me ice cream, he bought me cake._

_He brought me home with a bellyache._

_Momma, momma, I feel sick. Call the doctor quick, quick, quick!_

Peter had called the doctor when she went into labor early. Her water had broken in the middle of the new game they’d been playing. “It's called ‘Teach an Old Dog a New Trick,’ ” he’d told her. “You'll like it. I promise.”

He put a leash around her neck and made her get down on all fours. Naked. Her long straight brown hair hung over her face, hiding her shame. Her belly almost touched the floor. When she said she didn’t think she liked this game, he told her she wasn’t any fun anymore and maybe he should just find someone who still knew how to show him a good time. “Not many men still want their wives when they’re as fat as you are these days. You’re never satisfied.”

The baby came ten hours later and after that, there was no saying no to games. She’d tried to divert his attention one night, and he’d pressed his face so close to hers that their noses were flattened together. “So just how do you think you’ll raise a little girl all on your own? You forget who the breadwinner is around here? That baby formula alone costs a small fortune.”

Her milk had dried up. It wasn’t fashionable to nurse, but she’d wanted to anyway. She wanted to first give her life, and then the nourishment to grow. But Peter said her breasts belonged to him. He didn’t want them oozing milk. And that was the end of it.

From infancy, Rose, too, had loved games. With her, though, games were a joy. Sheila never tired of making them up to entertain her little girl. When Rose was two, it unexpectedly dawned on Sheila that she could make up games just as easily for her husband as she could for her daughter.

Peter liked Sheila’s initiative. “I knew you’d come around sooner or later,” he’d said. She made up games she could tolerate and sometimes even control—at least a little.
Rose sings out in her insolent new voice.

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Ice cream soda, cherry on the top,} \\
\text{Who’s your boyfriend? I forgot.} \\
\text{Peter!}
\end{align*}\]

Rose isn’t allowed to call her parents by their first names. Her tone is mocking. She changes the rhyme, adding: “Or was it Q, or R, or S, or all the letters?”

Her voice goes beyond defiance. Hints at rage.

She glares at Sheila.

Rose picks the next rhyme, too.

\[\begin{align*}
A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O \\
\text{Peter, Peter, would you come to tea?} \\
\text{Yes, no, maybe so} \\
\text{Sheila, Sheila, would you marry me?} \\
\text{Yes, no, maybe so} \\
\text{How many children did we have?} \\
1.
\end{align*}\]

Rose wants a brother or sister. She hates being an only child. She stands out in a Catholic school, some kind of freak. It is a sore spot.

But Sheila has always been very, very careful never to risk another child. When Rose was only four, Peter wanted to include her in games. Sheila had shaken with fear. “Then you have to make ours more interesting,” he told her. So she did whatever he wanted—which had started including other people. A woman, first. An agent from another district, the top policy seller in the state. Men couldn’t turn her down. She had a 40-inch bust and wore clingy, low-cut blouses that shimmered when she moved.

Next he’d brought home a couple he’d met at a lounge in a town nearby—an older bald man with money and his young wife with a skinny waist, blonde hair that added three inches to her height, baby blue eye shadow, and jet black eyeliner that swept onto her cheeks and met at a point at her brow line. She still appears in Sheila’s dreams as a disembodied head hovering in the background.

Then there were two men who reeked of whiskey and cheap aftershave that smelled like wet timber. She refused to remember what Peter had made her do with them. Sheila lost track after that.

She’d cry afterwards, and Peter would chide her. “It’s just a game. What’s the big deal?” When she said she didn’t like the games anymore, he would cock his head and say, “Maybe Rose would like to have some fun. Little girls love games.” And so she’d go along.
Rose moves her body to the beat of the swinging ropes and jumps in with her mother. “I can outlast you, Mom. You’re no good anymore,” she says. Her voice is bitter now. Sheila prefers defiance.

*Cinderella, dressed in yellow*  
*Went upstairs to kiss a fella*  
*Made a mistake and kissed a snake*  
*How many doctors did it take?*  
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.

Sheila wishes she knew the right rhyme to tell her daughter why she was kissing another man. Rose wouldn’t have known Peter was watching from inside the closet. And would that even matter to her to begin with?

“No more games,” she’d told him. It’d been last night. Late. Too late.

She had watched Rose’s hand fly to her mouth, and then her daughter was backing out of the room, running down the hallway, slamming her bedroom door.

She tried to go after her, but Peter had burst out of the closet and thrown Sheila on the bed and taken her then and there, so excited by the unexpected turn of events that he had orgasmed within seconds.

“Tell her she was dreaming,” he said later, tracing the ridge of her shoulder gently with his soft hands. “She’ll believe you.”

She’d pulled away from him. “No more games.”

“Then Rose will have to take your place.”

She’d grabbed his testicles and closed her fingers so tightly around them his eyes rolled back in his head.

His note had been brief. “Don’t trouble yourself looking for me. I’m not playing hide and seek. I’m just plain gone.”

Sheila’s feet are blistering from the heat, but she doesn’t notice. She puts her hands on her daughter’s shoulders and calls out the next rhyme herself, changing the words just enough to hint at what she knows she will never openly discuss.

*In a cabin by the woods*  
*A frightened mother by the window stood*  
*Saw a rabbit hopping by, knocking at her door.*  
*“Help me! Help me! Help!” the rabbit cried.*  
*“Before the hunter shoots me down.”*  
*Little rabbit come inside*  
*Safely you may hide. Safely you may hide.*  
*How many hours must you hide?*  
1. 2. 3.
They jump together, feet pounding in unison. When they reach 26, a hornet buzzes by and Susie drops the ropes.

Rose backs away, her eyes locked on Sheila’s. She goes into the house, slamming the door. Within moments, she returns with an egg. She cracks it onto the sidewalk. It fries up almost perfectly round, sizzling a dark crust underneath. The other girls go home for supper, teasing Rose that they’d like to stay, but so sorry, they only like fried eggs for breakfast.

“So how’d you get to be the rope jumping queen?” Rose finally asks, curiosity temporarily overcoming anger.

“In the winter I had to stay in and mind my mother,” Sheila tells her. “She was very strict. You know that. But in the summer, she would get a case of temporary sanity and let me out. ‘That’s what summer is for,’ she always said. For running through fields and jumping rope and kicking the can and putting on a bathing suit to run in the rain.”

“We never do that. Run in the rain.”

Sheila knows there will never be a right time to say it. “Your father isn’t coming back.”

Rose pokes the egg yolk with a stick and watches the yellow stream ooze across the gray pavement. “Because of that man you were kissing?”

Sheila nods, wishing she could spill out the facts. But she’d rather swallow the cruel truth than burden her daughter with the simple fact that she had done it for her.

“Why did he always let all those people come over here? They always woke me up.”

Sheila shakes her head involuntarily, trying to take in this new information. How long had her daughter known?

“Why did you let him bring them?” Rose persists.

She will never let her daughter have a slight, marginal, or even minuscule connection to it, so she says, “Some grown-ups never learned to play by the rules.”

“You should have,” Rose tells her and goes inside.

Later they eat hotdogs in the backyard under the oak tree and watch the clouds roll in. Rose plays with her food. Finally Rose says, “Did you really wear your bathing suit out in the rain?”

The simple question bears no rancor. Sheila relaxes. “Every summer. Every time it rained.”

Her hope that the worst has passed between them is short lived as Rose goes inside. Sheila hears her close her bedroom door.

Sheila watches the sky fill with clouds and turn black. Finally, she hobbles into her own room, her feet blistered and raw, and lies down on top of the bedspread. The soft chenille roses beneath her are already imprinting her skin. The breeze blows through the open windows and cools the room.

She sinks into the dip in the middle of the bed, but quickly edges over to one side. She remembers herself as a young bride, curling into that hollow alone when Peter was out of town, missing him. Missing them together. She won’t let nostalgia trick her, and forces
herself to remember the games. The humiliation. She leans harder on the flat edge of one side. She'll form new curves and dips of her own. Maybe she'll buy another bed, one untainted by memories once sweet. Now sour. She forgets she has no income. No money to pay any bills. No skills. Maybe she and Rose can move. Start over.

She closes her eyes as the first raindrops hit the roof, the first tears leak from her eyes.

Soon the rain pounds down so hard she doesn’t hear the tentative knock on the door.

She doesn’t hear it open.
But she hears the footsteps coming toward the bed.
Loud.
She can’t open her eyes. She wants to scream. Go away! Go away! Go away! Every muscle in her body clenches.

Before she is even touched, she reels with revulsion.
But the hand that touches her shoulder is gentle. Soft.
“Mom?”
Sheila sits up. “Rose?” Her voice is an octave too high, giddy with relief.

Rose is wearing the two-piece bathing suit they had picked out together from the Sears catalog. It’s white, trimmed with navy blue piping. When Rose had modeled it, Sheila’s heart had missed a beat.

Rose dangles Sheila’s one-piece flowered suit in front of her. “It’s summer,” Rose says. “And it’s raining.”

In the dark summer night, they dance, laughing, counting the raindrops that land on their tongues.

Chocolate bears and gingerbread cats,
All dressed up in whipped-cream hats.
Danced in the garden under the moon,
Beat sweet rhythms with a wooden spoon,
Whirling, turning, jumping to the beat,
Melting down to their raindrop feet.
When the baker ran to see,
They ran beneath the rainbow tree,
Running in between the rows,
Tripping over raindrop toes.
There were 1. 2. 3 . . .
When I first met my Great Uncle Hugh and had a good long stare at the crater in his forehead, I thought the off-color skin graft—stretched and shiny over so much vacant real estate—looked like Silly Putty. I was ten and frequently had Silly Putty on my mind.

It was August 1970, Fort Worth, Texas, and in the vernacular, “hotter 'n blazes.” The hospital had sent Grandpa home to die. One lung was gone; the other was half-gone from smoking four packs of Pall Malls a day and three decades of working in a bakery. If the cigarettes hadn’t killed him, the flour dust would have. The women of my family sat an informal vigil, staying close by Grandpa’s side. No telling how much longer he had.

Grandpa Malcolm, habitually a hermit, usually did his best to avoid attention, yet here he was in a rented hospital bed smack dab in the center of the living room of our ancestral shack. The whole house, no more than 500 square feet, sat like a postage stamp in the corner of a large, barren field. Although we were a small clan, the women alone filled the house.

To me, Grandpa seemed fine, happy really. He wasn’t worried because he’d died once before about six years earlier. Unfortunately, just as he’d begun to float off over a softly lit field of daisies, the doctors seized his truant soul and slammed it back into his body. Story has it Grandpa came back yelling, “You lousy sons-a-bitches!” That’s why I believed, and still do believe, he was really looking forward to dying again and doing it right this time. This, along with the heavy doses of morphine that made him more cheerful than usual and everyone else’s brave smiles, kept me from worrying.

So, while others hovered and fussed over Grandpa, I spent most of my time sprawled out on the floor next to his bed in an effort to leech what coolness I could from the linoleum—in front of the big box fan with my elbows holding down the pages of Mary Poppins and my chin propped up in the cup of my hands. The roar of the fan two inches from my nose drowned out whatever the grown-ups overhead said, and somehow, being inaudible they seemed insubstantial as well—except for Grandpa. I could always hear and feel my grandpa’s presence.

I don’t know how many days droned on this way. The hypnotic whir of the fan with so much heat and idleness turned time into liquid, making the days and nights run together. Mostly, I remember how very pleasant everything seemed at the time. It was like a vacation to be so thoroughly ignored. I could spend hours saying “maaaaa-maaaaaa-maaaaaa-ahhhhh-ahhhhh-ahhhhh” into the fan, just to hear the blades chop my noises into little pulsating bullets of sound, and no one ever told me to knock it off. The activity itself wasn’t all that exciting, but not being told to knock it off was. The women who sat vigil—my mother, grandmother, and aunt—tolerated my silliness because I was Grandpa’s favorite and could do no wrong when he was around. Others came and went from the living room, but I was a fixture.
Regardless of the situation, Grandpa and I had always been comfortable together, thanks largely to our history of small-but-gratifying crimes. These included a beat-up old bicycle he couldn’t afford but bought for me anyway after Mom said she wouldn’t, assorted puppies and kittens that followed us home, potentially incendiary experiments with a magnifying glass, our own home-made paint and the neighbor’s tree we used it on, and the re-enacted deeds of our bloodiest Scottish ancestors with real kilts and a carefully decommissioned flintlock gun. We were kindred hermit souls, who toward the end, were reduced to gentler entertainments. I read and Grandpa slept, lulled heaven knows where by the senseless windy sounds I made into the fan—my gift to him of so much breath. I had enough for both of us.

I don’t know how long the vigil lasted, but I’d worn out *Mary Poppins* and had begun to work on a thick volume called *Favorite Poems Old and New*, when late one afternoon our languor suffered a scene change. Two highway patrolmen came to the door and asked to speak with Mr. Monroe. When Grandma indicated her husband asleep in the hospital bed, they asked if she would please step outside for a moment.

Mom, Aunt Venus, and I were so surprised we forgot to eavesdrop until it was too late. In seconds Grandma was back in the house and the officers were gone. Letting the cranky, old screen door bang shut behind her—usually a no-no—Grandma ran through the house, past us, and into the kitchen.

I’d always thought her unflappable, Grandma Ollie, cool and collected even the time she killed a nest of rattlesnakes. I’d been playing in the dirt, pretending to help weed the garden, when I saw my mellow granny turn into a killing machine. I heard the Celtic battle cry before I saw that merciless upward swing of Grandma’s garden hoe and the blinding speed with which it came back down on the nest of rattlers, again and again, every lethal stroke backed by every ounce of Grandma, going *hackety-hackety-hack-back-back-back* like an over-achieving henchman.

Anyway, she went running through the house making a big commotion. Mom and Aunt Venus went after her. Over the sound of their questions and Grandma’s answers, I heard drawers being yanked open and the clank of silverware. “Here, help me hide these,” she said, reappearing in the living room with a bouquet of steak knives in one hand and a meat cleaver in the other. When she saw me, she stopped and said, “Hide her too before Hugh gets here!” Grandpa was awake now, laughing.

My mom said, “Oh Momma, for Pete’s sake! Uncle Hugh is harmless! He just wants to see Daddy!”

Venus agreed, “Yeah Momma, Uncle Hugh just wants to see Daddy before it’s—uh, it’s—well, it’s . . . you know.”

“Before I’m dead, you mean,” Grandpa said.

Grandma groaned and went off to hide her scissors and Grandpa’s razor.

During the brief calm that followed in the wake of Hurricane Grandma, I found out what the officers had said. They’d come to tell us that Grandpa’s younger brother, Hugh, had escaped from the lunatics’ asylum—that’s what they called it—and had last
been seen walking from Houston to Fort Worth. Several drivers had noticed, worried, and called the state police to report a poor old gentleman traveling on foot along the highway. When the asylum discovered Hugh's absence and notified the authorities, they pieced the story together and figured the old man on the highway was probably Hugh. The patrolmen hadn't come to warn us that a dangerous maniac was on his way, but that they couldn't find Hugh. They said if he didn't die of dehydration first, he'd probably show up soon to see his brother, and the folks at the asylum would appreciate a call if he did.

The only real danger was for Hugh, who, out of respect for the dying, had worn a black wool suit and hat. That, along with the fact that the temperature for the last week had refused to go below 100°F even at night, meant it was likely Hugh would be buried in his suit before he ever got to see his brother.

I never even knew we had a Hugh. Mom said all she really remembered was how when they were little girls, she and Aunt Venus hardly dared whisper his name. Great Uncle Hugh was our family's best awful secret.

As Mom told me the little she knew about her uncle, Grandpa drifted in from the ether to fill in parts of the story and to say things like, "That's my baby brother" and "Don't you worry about Hugh, he'll make it here," obviously having the time of his life. By then, Grandma had resigned herself to the impending visit. "Oh, he'll be all right," she said. "It takes brains to die of heat stroke."

I, on the other hand, could hardly contain myself. The thought that there might be people you had to hide sharp things from had never occurred to me, and now, thrilled and terrified, I was going to meet one. I think Mom and Aunt Venus were as excited as I was. Grandpa said he was tickled because now he could be a member of, rather than the object of, our vigil.

Night was well settled before he appeared, a dark silhouette against the blue-black infinity of the Texas sky. Stars winked behind him as he peeked in through the rusted lace of the old screen door. With the shades left open, we saw him long before he came up the walk, so the sight of him on the threshold didn't startle us—quite the opposite. We'd sat silent and watched his slow progress, a sight that inspired stillness. Hugh wore an aura woven of hushes, the rare kind found only on long roads at night. The clean emptiness of all the distances he'd traveled now carried him softly to our door.

He didn't knock or clear his throat or walk in, but just waited outside in the dark, in his somber black suit, his head slightly bowed and hat in hand—losing the last of his mortality with every precious drop of sweat. Hugh had traveled two hundred and seventy miles. Heat rolled off him in waves the way it does off a desert highway.

Time had ceased, so I don't know how long he stood silent and motionless before the crickets finally resumed their singing and broke our collective trance. Next thing I knew, he was by his brother's side. The small room was crammed with furniture, oxygen tanks, and other deathbed paraphernalia, but Hugh navigated it gracefully despite his exhaustion. He was relieved to have reached his brother in time.
Hugh held Grandpa’s hand, and they talked of simple things in low tones, in the secret language of brothers—no regrets, just comfortable sounds. I had never seen men hold hands before, and the way their old fingers wove together so naturally after having been apart for so long thrilled me and made my heart ache beyond all reason.

No one slept that night.

Eventually, Mom got Hugh out of his suit and into the bath, then into one of Grandpa’s thin cotton shirts and a pair of lightweight trousers. Afterward, she and Aunt Venus took turns re-hydrating their uncle with glass after glass of iced tea and feeding him biscuits and pan-gravy. Bit by bit, Hugh began to look more like Grandpa than Grandpa had recently. He was a taller, thinner, younger version. But, unlike Grandpa, he wore glasses—thick, coke-bottle glasses, the left lens a cloudy green. After their initial hello and after Hugh freshened up and began to look like he might live, Grandpa too seemed more lively. The big brother teased the little brother.

“Don’t worry about me, Hugh. I feel fine. Why, I was thinking about swimming across Lake Worth next week. What do you think of that?”

Hugh thought that sounded just fine.

“Got a stopwatch?” Grandpa asked.

Hugh didn’t have one.

“Well, how long do you suppose it’ll take me to swim across Lake Worth?”

Hugh had no idea how long, but he agreed when Grandpa guessed it would take at least ten minutes.

This talk about swimming scared me. Grandpa was supposed to die. We both knew that. But now he seemed to think he could swim Lake Worth. Hugh’s willingness to believe fooled me into believing too for a few seconds, and imagining that Grandpa might live, while knowing he couldn’t, was plain awful.

By now, the womenfolk had disappeared into the back of the house to give the brothers privacy, but I’d used my favorite grandchild status and remained. I went unnoticed until the morphine took over and Grandpa drifted back to sleep, leaving Hugh and me alone for the first time.

Between the visit from the highway patrol and Hugh’s arrival, my mother had warned me about the way my great uncle, the lunatic, would look. She told me not to stare and to pretend I didn’t notice anything strange when I saw him head on.

Hugh had been an exceptionally bright young man, the only person in the family to go to college. He’d graduated with honors and soon had a job working for the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Everyone liked him, and no one was surprised at how fast he worked his way up, earning jobs that required increasingly higher levels of security. They were surprised, however, to learn that during his impressive climb, Hugh had also managed to embezzle a quarter of a million dollars. Naturally, considering the FBI’s resources and his co-workers’ inclination and training for finding things out, the missing money was soon discovered and traced to Hugh.
They came with guns drawn and smashed in the front door of Hugh’s home. Hugh had just enough time to grab his service revolver, cock the hammer, and place the barrel against his right temple. But right when he pulled the trigger, one of his colleagues tackled him and jarred the hand with the gun. The bullet did not travel from the right temple straight through and out the left, as Hugh had intended, but through the right temple and out the front, taking his left eye, half his forehead, and a considerable amount of IQ along with it: an instant home lobotomy.

I stared at Hugh the way any ten-year-old who has been told not to would, and thought, *Silly Putty.* He had an almost perfectly square dent that was quite deep, scooped out, and crater-like, taking up nearly half his forehead. The graft covering this dent was pinker and shinier than the rest of his skin, and it was the exact color and consistency of Silly Putty. I’d expected the sight of him to scare me to pieces, but he was just sort of asymmetrical and patched together looking—oddly endearing.

“Hi,” he said. “My name is Hugh. What’s yours?”

I told him.

Grandpa said in his sleep, “My grandbaby.”

Hugh took this in seriously and thought a moment before he said, “That makes you my grandniece then.”

I supposed so, and then we spent some time taking each other’s inventory. I blinked first.

“What are you reading?” he asked, and nodded toward my book.

I hadn’t been reading at all. I’d been staring and eavesdropping, so I said the first title I could think of, “The Walrus and the Carpenter.”

“Dear old Charles Dodgson,” ¹ he said.

“Oh, yes, that Walrus and Carpenter.”

He looked up, studied the ceiling, then looked back at me and said:

> The sun was shining on the sea,  
> Shining with all his might;  
> He did his very best to make  
> The billows smooth and bright—  
> And this was odd, because it was  
> The middle of the night.

And with that, he had me in the palm of his hand. I adored my Great Uncle Hugh from that moment on, although after that night I never saw him again.

As he recited the whole poem from memory, he stood straight and proper, hands hanging motionless at his sides, as if he were reciting in front of the class for his teacher

¹ Lewis Carroll is the pen name for Charles Dodgson.
and wanted to do his best. Gentle snores came from the bed behind him. When I try to recall now where in the house the rest of the family was or anything else about that moment, I believe the world must have disappeared. All I can remember is looking up into Hugh’s amazing face, hypnotized by his soft tenor voice and by the fact that an adult was trying so hard to please me.

When he finished, all I could say was, “Man! You’ve got a good memory.”

“For some things, yes.”

Grandpa came back to us for a moment, or maybe he’d been there all along, and said, “She also likes ‘The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere.’”

“You do?” Hugh asked. “May I sit with you?”

I nodded and skootched over to make room. I was already so comfortable with Hugh, thinking of him as an extension of my beloved grandpa, that I was eager to settle in for a night of poetry set to the tune of our diligent box fan. But when Hugh sat down he made a muffled metallic clank sound. He shifted in his seat and let loose a few more rude clanks. Hugh looked mildly bewildered, stood up, lifted the cushion, and saw an odd assortment of steak knives, a meat cleaver, scissors, a razor, and knitting needles. He paused, said “Oh,” replaced the cushion, and sat back down as if it were no strange thing to find cutlery in the sofa.

Grandpa gave us both a Cheshire Cat grin and before fading away again, muttered, “Must be having soup tonight.”

And without further ado, Great Uncle Hugh begins “The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere”:

*Listen, my children, and you shall hear*

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2 The correct title of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem is “Paul Revere’s Ride,” but we, like many others, had our own title for it.
Ooligan Press is a general trade press founded at Portland State University.

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