



Loose Change

2009 SHORT STORY CONTEST

OOLIGAN PRESS EDITORS' CHOICE

Loose Change

**Ooligan Press Editors' Choice
2009 Short Story Contest**

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**Edited by the Advanced Editing Class
Winter 2009**



**Ooligan Press
Portland State University
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To Our Readers

Welcome to the fifth annual Ooligan Press Editors' Choice e-journal. The advanced editing students in Portland State University's Publishing Program held a short-story contest in winter term 2009 calling for unpublished short stories that explore the theme "Loose Change."

A rich variety of stories came in. Some writers concentrated on "Loose," others on "Change," and coins appeared in abundance—in jars, in pockets, in outstretched hands. We enjoyed stories about an elderly woman who gives peanut-butter cookies to street people; a man secretly in love with his bank teller; a sewer worker who may or may not invite a homeless girl to dinner; a young "Signer" who begs at freeway intersections and classifies her stoplight clientele; young men at loose ends who play "Bloody Knuckles" with a quarter.

Every class member pored over every submission. At last, we settled on the four winning stories. Each winning author is a writer to watch.

Congratulations to Sean Davis, our second two-time winner. Sean's story "Movement to Contact" appeared in the 2008 Editors' Choice e-journal, available at the Ooligan Website.

Karen Kirtley

Karen Kirtley teaches advanced editing in Portland State University's Publishing Program.

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We are grateful to Vinnie Kinsella's fall 2008 editing class for choosing the contest theme and to Leah Sims for keeping us organized.

Contributors

Bryan Beck was born in Werneck, Germany, in 1987 and has lived most of his life in the Willamette Valley. He has worked as a farm hand, a librarian, and a housekeeper at a remote Alaskan lodge. Bryan will complete his BA in English from Portland State University this spring. He has written music reviews for *Left of the Dial* and currently reviews poetry for the *Portland Review*. He has work forthcoming in the poetry column of the *Sunday Oregonian*.

Sean Davis is a graduate of Portland State University with a BA in English and has recently been accepted into the MFA writing program at Pacific University. He has had many jobs and traveled to many places in his thirty-six years and has always been fascinated by the lost, lonely, and weird. Davis considers himself a Portland writer, claiming the Pacific Northwest is as much a part of him as his arms, legs, and hands. He and his wife are expecting their first child.

James Norton moved from his hometown of Cleveland, Ohio, to Eugene, Oregon, in the summer of 2000. He graduated in 2005 from the University of Oregon, where he studied English and philosophy. James taught writing at Bailey Hill Instructional Center, an alternative middle school for at-risk youth, before attending Portland State University as a graduate student in English and a mentor in the University Studies sophomore inquiry program. He currently lives in southeast Portland with his wife, Josie. This is his first published story.

Helyn Trickey grew up in a small town in northern Florida. She and her family fled from a fair number of hurricanes, but none as devastating and deadly as Hurricane Katrina. She has a love-hate relationship with the South and thinks it's weird that she's been able to write about her southern roots only after moving to the West Coast. She is a journalist who has worked for CNN, the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, and the *Oregonian*, and she hopes to finish her MFA in Creative Writing from Portland State University before she's eligible for Social Security.

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Dolphins and Crocodiles

by Sean Davis

I stood under the fluorescent lights of the locker room, staring into a cracked mirror with the stark realization that I had been disappearing a little more each day for the past couple months. I didn't know how long I could go on before I was gone completely. My face moved closer until it was only an inch from my reflection. "I swear, Tobias, soon there will be nothing left."

Tobias and I worked the morning shift for Portland Parks and Recreation. We washed down public toilets and cleaned the statues and park grounds in the metro area. We worked Monday through Friday, 5:00 in the morning until 1:30 in the afternoon. Tobias was born in the Dominican Republic and moved to New York City when he was twenty-seven. He always tells endless stories of his childhood, but he's never told me about the years he spent in New York or how he ended up here in Portland. Tobias is black and has a thick accent. Most everyone thinks he is from Africa.

"You drink too much, Demas." When he smiled his teeth glowed.

I zipped up my brown jumpsuit. My name is Dennis. He knew that at one point. "I don't drink much at all."

We headed out to the Park Blocks between Jefferson and Madison streets because it was Tuesday. On Tuesdays we clean the bird shit off of *Theodore Roosevelt, Rough Rider*. The eighteen-foot equestrian statue, sculpted by New York artist Alexander Phimister Proctor, was given to the city by Dr. Henry Waldo Coe in 1922. The statue shows Roosevelt in his actual uniform back when he was a colonel, before his famous ascent of San Juan Hill during the Spanish-American War.

He is one of a long line of statues we take care of on the Park Blocks. We take care of the twelve narrow blocks of grass, statues, art, and trees. We clean everything from the white Indiana limestone of Donald Wilson's modern sculpture *Holon to Rebecca at the Well* (also known as the Shemanski Fountain) between Main and Salmon. I helped restore the

Shemanski when the city first hired me. Someone had pushed Rebecca off her well. That was back in April 2007. I had always felt that I helped maintain history, but after doing it for a couple years, I've found that I'm defending history more from the disrespect of man than from time or weather.

I take the MAX train home at 3:00. For the first year, I caught the train home at 1:35, right after work, but one week I had to work late because some kids vandalized the David P. Thompson elk statue on West Main Street. It's right over the Morrison Bridge, on the west side of the river. The road parts around it.

It took a week to scrub off the black spray paint. I can understand everyone's need to be seen and the desire to be remembered, but the kids who sprayed their unreadable names on the fountain base of the statue ejaculated the superficial all over tradition. I wouldn't be able to muster the audacity to spit at the established in an attempt to be known. Maybe that's why I'm disappearing, because I won't impose myself upon the world.

Anyway, that week I worked until 2:30 and took the MAX home at 3:00. That's when I saw her for the first time. She had something beyond attractiveness. I was struck by her intense vitality. I didn't think I would see her again, so I chalked it up to a beautiful anomaly. The second day, I felt chance favored me. On the third day, I fell in love. I have waited until 3:00 to go home every day since then. It's been almost two months.

I haven't talked to her yet. It's not that I don't think we would get along. On the contrary, if I could only gather enough of the real me before it disappears, I know we would have a chance at starting something special. I can tell that we are the same, but it is also painfully obvious that we are different, like smoke and fog—similar, but from two opposite sources.

"This is simple, Demas, go and talk to her. Say simply, 'Hello, Beautiful. What is your name? I am Demas,'" Tobias said as he swept broken glass from the sidewalk into the long-handled dustpan.

I poked at a newspaper on the ground with a pole, picked it up, and dropped it in the garbage can on our roll cart. "First of all, my name is Dennis—"

"Americans make love difficult, Demas. It is a simple thing."

I looked at the County Court House on Fourth Avenue and spoke

louder. "Look over there, Tobias. At the people. The court house."

He stopped and looked at the people.

"You see the two types of people? The ones in suits, nice clothes, with briefcases and a sense of purpose, and the others who dress like I do, who are there to pay fines, to do nothing but get older and labor at jobs they hate, to...I don't know."

"I see many people. I don't understand what you are saying."

"I don't either. I guess I'm trying to say that she is out of my league. Maybe she wasn't always, but now I don't know."

"Demas, if you are born a crocodile and you grow up a crocodile, you can't fault yourself for not becoming a dolphin."

I stabbed the point of my pole through an empty can of Red Bull.

Tobias' teeth glowed and he laughed. "When I was seven, I went on a trip with my family to Punta Cana. My papa's sister worked as a maid at the Paradisus Palma Real. The whole family stayed in her one-bedroom house. She was very lucky, Demas, to have so good a job. She took me to work with her one day because I was the smallest. She would let me swim in one of the pools."

I sighed and tried to decide if he was talking to me or to himself again. I pulled the stuck can off the end of the pole.

"That was the first time I saw Americans. They drove in their own bus with comfortable seats and didn't have to jump onto the back of whatever truck happened to drive by. They drank drinks from glasses with colored straws and paper umbrellas. They ate on plates whiter than the clouds. They had pockets full of coin money that had no purpose other than to make noise when they walked. I saw a man light a cigar with a gold lighter. I was amazed. That gold lighter reflected the sun, Demas. That gold lighter shined in my eyes even after I closed them. It shined in my eyes for years."

"That's great Tobias, but it doesn't have anything to do with what I'm talking about," I snapped.

He tucked his chin to his chest and wrinkled his forehead. He looked down at me for a few moments.

"Listen, I'm sorry, Tobias, I'm having a bad day. I'm going to go pick all the pennies from the Orpheus," I said, referring to the fountain *Farewell to Orpheus* up at Montgomery Street on the Portland State Campus. It was given to the city by Frederic Littman in 1973.

That afternoon when I got off work, I sat at Pioneer Square watching the different people, and for the first time I allowed myself the luxury of

envy. I watched people who had their lives together walk from business to business, get a mocha at Starbucks, jump on the MAX. I couldn't feel any satisfaction with any aspect of my life. I wanted to join the land of paid vacations, big-screen televisions, and dental coverage. I felt I couldn't go on living on a quarter tank, only able to put five dollars in at a time.

That afternoon I sat three seats behind her and watched how the sun reflected a copper hue off her red hair. She had on a wool skirt and coat with giant buttons. I drank in every detail.

I hadn't built a shrine to her in my apartment closet or anything, but the fact that I didn't talk to her after two months was becoming weird. Each day that went by without talking to her widened the gap between us. I couldn't allow myself to sink to such a pathetic and perverse position. In my mind, the act of initiating conversation with her became synonymous with fixing all that was wrong with my life.

The next morning, people passed me by without a look to assure me I was really there. It took three hours and thirteen minutes for someone to see me. We were cleaning the public toilet on West Eighth and Burnside. Inside, the toilet, sink, and soap dispenser are made of the same stainless steel. I guess the mirror is too, for that matter. We can't put glass in them because people will break it. Cleaning these restrooms is easy enough. We have a thick rubber hose and we hook it up to a water station on the outside of the restrooms and use a special key to adjust the water pressure. Then, while standing outside, we spray the walls and toilet area. All the dirt, grime, and waste flows down a small drain in the middle of the restroom. Of course, not everything washes down the drain. We are supposed to pick up the bigger things and throw them in the garbage, but most of the time I just try to spray them down the bigger grate in the gutter.

The water carried three cans of Hamm's and a tattered pair of navy blue jogging pants to the grate in the gutter. The torn pants caught on a tree branch lying on the grate. With my yellow, elbow-length rubber gloves I walked over and grabbed a leg of the pants and pulled. It took some tugging, but finally the soiled pants gave and my foot hit the curb and I toppled over. That is the moment a couple walking to work stopped and looked down at me.

I met their eyes and they looked away and kept walking. I slowly got up.

"At least you know that you are not invisible, Demas," Tobias laughed.

I threw the pants in the fifty-gallon garbage can we pushed around. "I never said I was turning invisible, I said I was disappearing."

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

"I think I sprained my pride bone," I said.

Tobias laughed.

"I'm going to talk to her today," I said.

"This is great, Demas, what are you going to say?"

I stood up and brushed my pants off. "I don't know. I haven't gotten that far, but I've been saving money for a while now. Why not spend it on some new clothes? I'm going to buy a new suit at Nordstrom Rack before taking the MAX home, and I am going to walk right up to her, look her in the eye and, I don't know, say something clever."

"Clever is good. Funny is good too." Tobias didn't look at me. He focused on unscrewing the hose and wrapping it up. "What about your hair? Are you going to get a nice hair cut?"

"Yeah, sure."

"And a watch? People with purpose, they have watches too. Are you going to get a watch?"

"Yeah, they sell those at Nordstrom too."

"Then I suppose you will get some shiny shoes?"

"Yeah, so? I've been saving for a while. I figure it's time I make a change."

"A big change. I'm sure it will all go very well for you, Demas." He wrapped the hose up like a lasso and put it on our roller cart.

I heard a degree of submission in his voice, as if he had given up on some point that obviously missed its mark.

I nearly missed the MAX. I had to run and jump between the closing doors. My new shoes squeaked as I slipped and almost fell, but I caught a hand strap on the silver rail of the car. At first I couldn't find her. When I did see her familiar shape, my heart stopped for half a second, and I started to cough. I felt my hands tingle, and a full-body perspiration began to set in.

The moment I had repeated in my head was finally happening. I had to do it. It might have started with attraction, but it had spiraled out of control into something much bigger. I had to prove I was still here. In my

head, I could bring all the little missing pieces of me back if I only engaged this stranger in conversation.

She was standing, looking out the window. I stood a foot behind her, closed my eyes tight, took a deep breath, and told myself I needed to do it. I opened my eyes, exhaled, and stepped closer to her. She didn't seem to notice me. I grabbed the rail above my head to stop shaking. I opened my mouth to talk, hoping the suit, watch, haircut, and shoes would tell me what to say, but nothing came out.

She glanced at me and then looked straight ahead.

I froze with an awkward smile on my face. I could smell the fragrance of juniper from her hair.

Finally, after a few agonizing moments, I heard her say, "Hello."

"Hello," I managed to stammer. Little white dots floated at the corners of my vision.

"Hey, what are you up to?" she asked, sounding very friendly but still staring straight ahead.

Surprised, I said, "Uh, nothing, I'm just on my way home, what—"

"Great!" she said, very excited. Then she said it again, "great!"

I chastised myself for thinking it was going to be so hard. I just couldn't figure out why she wouldn't look at me.

"So, my name is Dennis. What's yours?"

"Yeah, but Dan is such an asshole," she said.

"I, uh..." Confusion spread to realization, realization led to nausea.

"Hold on a sec," she said. She pressed a button on the Bluetooth in her ear and turned to me coldly, finally looking at me. "Can I help you?"

"Um...I'm sorry, excuse me." I took a step away from her and felt bits of me fall to the floor and scatter as if I had dropped a bag of marbles.

She pressed the button again. "Tom? Sorry, some weirdo. What can you do, public transportation. Anyway, Dan got up there and didn't know what the hell he was talking about. The presentation was atrocious...yes, atrocious."

I got off at the next stop and sat on a bench for an hour.

I stood under the fluorescent lights staring into that same cracked mirror, my fingers pushing my mouth together as if I could physically hold on to what was slowly disappearing. "I'm almost gone, Tobias."

"A Bluetooth?"

The mention of the word turned my stomach. "I won't be waiting until 3:00 anymore. In fact, I doubt if I ever ride the MAX at 3:00 again."

"What did you do with your fancy clothes, Demas?"

"I figure that I'll keep them; maybe you can wear them to my funeral."

Tobias stood up from the wooden bench between rows of lockers. I could see him behind me in the mirror. I turned around. "I tried to tell you."

"You mean the crocodile-dolphin thing?"

"Yes, but no."

I nodded, trying to look deep in thought while resigning myself, trying to come to terms with disappearing.

"When I saw the Americans where my auntie worked, I wanted to be them so badly. The thought never left my mind as I grew up. I thought and thought about it, creating a whole fantasy in my head. I learned English the best I could. I moved to New York City."

"And you became an American. It worked," I said.

"Yes and no. I drove a cab, I cleaned toilets, I washed dishes and passed the test for citizenship, I even bought a fancy gold lighter, but I could never be those people I saw."

I walked away from him and zipped up my brown jumpsuit. I was embarrassed to admit that I still didn't fully understand what he was trying to say.

"You can't make the big change, Demas. You set yourself up to fail. You'll find happiness in the small things. Life is too big to grab tightly, you have to find the loose change."

After work I didn't want to be alone and I didn't really want to be with anyone in particular, so I went to get some lunch at my favorite falafel place. Then I went to the Portland Art Museum and let myself get lost in the art, history, and beauty of the past. It made me think of what I do for a living. Sure, I had to deal with the occasional pool of vomit or feces; in fact, most of my job consisted of dealing with feces of one type or another: bird, dog, people. But there was more to it than that.

I walked outside and sat down in front of the ten-foot bronze statue of Abraham Lincoln with bowed head. I sat there for twenty minutes. He was sculpted by George FiteWaters and given to the city by Dr. Henry Waldo Coe in 1928. My eyes bounced from nook to cranny, seeing where

I would have to scrub in the days coming up, but then I relaxed my eyes and tried to look at it for the first time. I thought about the man, the position he held, our country, the war, and the reason the statue was made. I'm not sure how, but this led me to examine my life, what I do, how I live and act. Somehow, this time, I felt more than I had before, pride or something close.

I don't know how long I would have let myself sit out there, but right then, when I was feeling good about myself, a girl with blond and purple hair caught my eye. She looked at me and smiled. I smiled back, knowing I was really there.

I stood there for a few seconds and then ran after her, a complete stranger.

"Hey, hold on a second," I called.

She turned with a confused smile. "Yeah?"

"I, uh...what do you like better, dolphins or crocodiles?"

She cocked her head to one side and squinted at me. And then she smiled. "Crocodiles, I guess."

Together, Separate, Nowhere

by James Norton

Strapped into a pair of snowshoes, bourbon breath making white clouds of the cold, I steal across an embankment and over a buried road. I'm almost there, that glowing porch just ahead. But for a moment the wind dies down, and I look back across the lake at The Cave. It looks much different from here, all nested in a halo of light so that the falling snow and the two dead, towering oaks that flank its perimeter buzz in stark silhouette. Mesmerized, I rest upon three feet of snow as if it were a bench in the Villa Borghese, a Renaissance masterpiece, Caravaggio's *Calling of St. Matthew*, light in darkness, oil on canvas, glaze, resin. I sleep.

In the off-season, the twelve cabins dotting the banks of Little Averill Lake recede into the dead-slate shades of black ash and bigtooth aspen. Two common loons—one nesting, preening its winter jacket on the fresh down of last night's dusting; the other drifting across the surface of the water in a solitary V, silently surveying the horizon in a sequence of bobs like a prayer. It's going to snow.

I turn the key.

Inside the cabin, which my brother Nells dubbed "The Cave" out of fear for how dark it became at night, things look pretty much the same: couch to left of door, facing woodstove, next to wall of built-in shelves decorated in the dried-up ragout of childhood discovery—spines of outdated Encyclopedia Britannica and worn novels, river rocks, sticks engraved by a pocketknife, commemorating old loves. Pearl Jam. Nirvana. Sarah, Alicia, Jessica.

I drop my bag and cross the room to start a fire. The sound of crumpling newspaper mixes with the smell of blown-out matches and a stream of suddenly clear memories. I'm exhausted. I make for the bedroom to lie down. The fire crackles and flames with life. I fall asleep inside the warmth of The Cave.

I dream of her, windows down, driving out of the city in a Jag, hair moving across her cheek at intoxicating angles against soft, pale skin; lips

in a slick red heart, slowly drawing together in a circle of thought. I wake up, holding my junk, just before she's about to say something. I get up to pour a drink. I smell her everywhere, even here, this dank fortress in the woods.

Taking down the Maker's from a shelf above the sink, I pour it neat into a glass from a set Nells gave me for my thirty-first birthday and scour the kitchen drawer. I remember him stashing at least the better half of a bag, what he called Blueberry Kush—something he special ordered from a friend out west and brought up specifically for last April's steelhead run. I think of calling him, someone, anyone—forgetting for the moment that I intentionally left my cell at work and that the nearest phone is at the general store five miles down. I'd be lucky to get ten yards in this kind of weather. Running my tongue along the gummed line of a rolling paper, I finish one off. The Cave fills with smoke, and I doze in that sweet haze.

She's below me. I can hear her talking to someone. Someone else is down there with her. I follow the sound of her voice and call her name. I can hear better now. She whispers, I remember. I see her. She's in the bathtub, turning the faucet off with her toes, talking on the phone. I want to speak with her. I need to know something. I shout her name, but she does not hear me. She hangs up the phone, stands, and reaches for a towel. I quiet, watching her. She throws on her robe, legs even longer now. I shout her name. She leaves.

I blink my eyes awake and pour another drink.

Outside, gathering more logs from the woodshed behind the cabin, snow finding its way into the folds where I've jammed Levis into boots, I think of her eyes, the way her face went slack as she looked at me, three weeks ago, when I came home to the heavy zip of her suitcase.

I'm not coming back, she said.

I did not say anything. Instead, I did what any writer does. I observed and recorded. I took diligent notes as if instinctively knowing to craft a sort of replica: her shape and smell, the way light played on her pink skin, how she sometimes bit her lower lip before speaking. I collected them all, a crazed fanatic.

I guess I'm only now feeling the weight of those words. I repeat them aloud—I am not coming back—and, listening close, I hear them descend, one by one, their echo throbbing out an absence. But there's something about this solitude, being far away from the city, out in these woods, caught

in a storm, mixed up in wind and fire and smoke, this intoxicating dance of bends and twists and pirouettes where I finally open up and everything comes rushing out so that remembering anything seems unnecessary.

Feeling thankful for matches, dry wood, fire, bourbon, smoke—the elemental necessities—I pour another Maker’s and finger through some old jazz in the corner: Peterson, Basie, Getz, Gillespie. Walking back for another drink, I see it—a porch light beaming from a cabin across the lake.

During the winter, the old man says, we usually don’t get many visitors. He smooths the dog’s ears back, making it a sea-lion as he says this. Yup, pretty cold, he says, thrusting out his mid-section, fiddling with keys in his breast pocket. More’n three feet fell last night. Didn’t quit. And when somebody decides to take a nap in something like this, I’m tellin’ you, they’re either looking to die or just plain crazy. I wonder about you. He squints and stares, purses his lips. My dog, she started barking, braver than me, yes sir. She must’ve found something on you she liked. Overalls and a black and red logging flannel peek out from under his robe. The cabin is his home. His name is Oliver.

Where’s my stuff? I ask, coming to, forgetting I don’t care, throwing aside blankets, finding myself exposed.

Your clothes are drying, and your pack’s over here. He points to a knotted up bench underneath the window. Here, try these, he says, throwing a set of sweats at me, a balled-up pair of socks, turning away.

I groan—the swelling pulse of my head, the taste of last night’s bourbon, bile. I saw your lights on, I say.

All I know is my dog here found you, and that storm didn’t want you to die. When you’re dressed, he says, looks like you could use a bite.

Even though they don’t look very clean, I slip on the sweats, feeling grateful, safe. I take a deep breath in, let it go. I walk over to a tiny alcove decorated in shells, some beautifully arrayed in cyclones of myriad earth tones. I turn one around in my hand, flip it, find its weight across two fingers, balance it there, set it back. On my way out, I touch an anchor—cast iron, not meant for décor. It looks awkward on the wall, heavy, held up in some smattering of rusted out nails bent over on their ends, retired. I follow the smell of bacon into the kitchen, Oliver still in his robe. Smells good I say, nosing up to the stove a little.

Take a seat, he says, pointing to a small foldout card table behind me.

When she made associate at Zdrojewski and Cellino, we celebrated at Allesandras. Rioja to chase down our barely fired pesto polenta rounds piled high with fresh mozzarella, slices of ripe Roma tomato, and pirate-sword toothpicks to hold the towering forms together. Low-brow grub for up-and-coming contemporary men and women, she joked, spearing my hand. I loved to watch her eat, that she used her fingers. She was different from other big-city women.

We put a down payment on a loft in Greenpoint later that year, with hardly any talk of marriage. I was ready. She wasn't. She chose it, that particular unit, said it made her feel new—a stark, modern space with slick, black track lighting, a glass wall, bamboo flooring, and a bidet.

At the grand opening of its rooftop deck and bar, she whistled to Bobby Darin, and we kissed full of champagne bubbles to a commanding view of Manhattan across the river. She had on a black dress—vintage, she told me, silk velvet, scoop neck, chiffon collar. When I left her at the railing for another round of drinks, she found me in line and surprised me, perched up on her toes, running her hand through my hair. Her eyes, fingertips telling me exactly what to do. Her lips. We left the drinks.

When she spun me around and forced my back up against the door to our apartment. Do you like this dress, Desmond? She ordered.

Yes, I said.

We eat in silence. Me with my head down, rising in gulps of water like a drowning man; him with his mouth open, smacking his lips between chews, petting his dog.

What's your dog's name?

Fish, he says.

Your dog's name is Fish?

That's what I said.

No, I mean, that's great, I say, smiling.

Fish's eyes go manic, pulsing out to flying saucers. Her tail, thumping on the floor in kick-drum heartbeats, fills out the awkward silence as Oliver praises her in a head rub. She lies down, rolls over, gives paw, moans, watches us eat. She earns a bacon strip, and it disappears no sooner than it leaves Oliver's hand. He smiles, keeping his teeth to himself. He butters the last piece of toast and slides it over my way.

That's okay, I say, shaking my hands in refusal.

Go ahead, he says, forcing it onto my plate. Soak up some booze.

I nod, accepting his toast as medicine, generosity.

He doesn't ask any questions. Where I'm from; what I'm doing up here—wasted—out in a storm. He stands, plate of crumbs on the table. Fish, balancing on hind legs, cleans it off and shambles after him, out of the kitchen. I am alone.

I wash our plates and find Fish and Oliver in a small back room of the cabin, laid out like sunning towels—beanbag bed and La-Z-Boy recliner, puffy arms all chewed up on the ends, stuffing. A talk show out of Burlington plays softly on the radio, and I listen to the voice of a botanist discussing the difference between a flower and a fruit. Fish lifts her head, and Oliver opens his eyes to the jangle of her collar.

Never listen to a word myself, just their voices, he says. Come on in. Do you like radio?

I guess, I say. I once knew a guy who knew a guy that worked under the chief operator for a jazz station out of New York City. He turned me onto *Kind of Blue* when I was studying for comprehensives at Cornell. It relaxes me. Hypnotic.

Who? The guy? Or, the guy who knew the guy?

What?

Who turned you on to Miles Davis?

I think back to the time Bennet introduced me to Elsie. We were at a place called Chelsea's, a trio covering *What Am I Here For?* She knew Bennet from their law program and came up to our booth after spotting him from the bar. I couldn't answer when she asked my name. She loved Miles too, called him The Prince of Darkness.

That she never told me about St. Louis, that a man started calling the house in the evening, that Elsie began showing up from work distant and short did not bother me. I understood her promotion at the law firm meant she needed to remain available to her clients 24/7. I acknowledged her work as her own, something we didn't need to share, something hers alone.

When I met him, I did not immediately match his voice to the one that called night after night. Elsie had just returned from a work trip, and we were out to dinner. In the middle of our conversation about her mother, who had recently been hospitalized for a paralyzing stroke, I noticed her eyes traveling across the room, away from our discussion, far from me.

What about assisted living? I asked, spinning around to find a man in mid-wave at the far end of the restaurant. Do you know him?

I love you Desmond, she said.

When she said that—I love you Desmond—I felt myself retreat, my stomach tighten. When the man finally stood next to me, addressing me, hand extended, I found myself someplace else, lost, unable to attend the situation, scrambling for the right place to bury her love.

I like the blues, Oliver says. My son, he's the one that turned me on to jazz. Brought home records by the dozen. Can you believe it? 1999 and the kid's bringing 'em home by the crateful. I didn't even own a turntable. Must have been some kind of fad, he says.

No fad, I say. Your son just has good taste.

Had, he says.

I say nothing.

Nothing you can do. One day you come and one day you go. He pauses. Five years we tried for that kid, and, when Emerson finally came, he came fighting, broke her pelvic bone like a wish. He died last April. Fell asleep, just didn't wake up. Heart attack.

I had no idea someone so young could—I say.

One day you go, he stops me.

I sit down, heavy, still feeling a little drunk. Fish lays her head back in her paws, twitching her way across an invisible landscape. The radio switches over to music. We fall asleep, the three of us—together, separate, nowhere.

Desmond, she said, this is Paul, the man I've been helping in St. Louis. Paul, Desmond. I stood up and took his hand firmly, looking him straight in the eyes. Silver haired, in a gray Brooks Brother's suit and burgundy tie, he looked almost old enough to be her father. His face cut at angles like a Doberman, and for a moment I pictured Elsie in her strappy stilettos marching him, collared, on hands and knees, across the floor of some sleazy highway motel. My hands clenched into fists.

He hit me with the usual onslaught of clichés: told me he was a big fan of my column, asked me what I was currently reading, said something about the election, the weather, the food. But I told him little, kept it short. Before he departed, he played the cavalier and took Elsie's hand in

a kiss, giving me the eye while he did it. I was enraged and, for a split second, imagined myself standing over his dead, expensive body. Blood everywhere.

On the ride home, we said nothing. Rain thundered across the roof of the cab, exaggerating our silence, sending us to shift in our seats until I found myself suddenly unable to take it anymore. What's going on, El? I waited for her to reply, windshield wipers synching with my pulse. But she said nothing, just looked out the window, so pretty.

I find myself under a blanket, sunk in a recliner. Oliver's radio is missing—silence. I turn on the lamp and scan the cabin. No Oliver. No Fish, either. Trading out the sweats, I slip into my boots. Two sets of tracks, his and hers, lead about thirty yards up a steep incline to a plateau where another log structure perches in a stand of maple. Fish, appearing as if from nowhere, greets me outside just as Oliver opens up a set of shop doors to let us in.

Hope we didn't cause a scare, he says. I knew you'd find your way up here sooner or later. He's standing at a workbench, back turned to me. A wooden skeleton is splayed out across the room, taking up the floor. He holds a vice in one hand, scanning for a clear signal with his other.

Fish, all wags, trots over to the bench, nose up, sniffing the air—fresh sawdust, lumber—settling in next to Oliver with a shimmy.

What are you building? I ask.

Oh, this one's gonna be a river skiff, he says, fly fishing.

You build boats?

Yep, he says. For a while now. Gained a bit of a reputation for it. I used to fish, though, commercially, up off the coast of Maine—two-hundred fifty miles as the crow flies. He points to a black-and-white photo pinned up on the wall over a bleached-out map. When my wife got sick, I quit. That's when I really started building. This one, he says with some pride, this one's bound for Eugene, Oregon, man by the name of Kiplinger, flies up for a few weeks every year, usually in summer.

I do not ask about his wife. It's clear that she's gone, that it hurts.

He stops, turning the radio down, approaching me, heavy boots. Shh, he says, fingers up, crossing his lips. Listen. Can you hear it?

What? I stop, holding breath.

It's early.

What's early?

It's a snowy owl, male for sure. He points to the ceiling. There, he says, and I hear it, faint, far off in the distance but definite—a single drawn-out screech followed by a series of clacks as if hammering nails, as if nature is building itself. We are still in that quiet moment, even Fish.

Boy, that's a treat, Oliver says, returning to his work, gathering tools from around the shed. Do me a favor and hand me that low-angle jack. It's right there, underneath the picture. Looks like this only bigger. He holds up a device shaped like a shoe.

This it? I say.

Yep, let's see it here.

I turn back to the photograph. It's of him, maybe a little younger than me, thinner, shaven, burnt by the sun. He's fishing, alone but for a thousand waves keeping him afloat. Freedom, I think to myself.

After we got home that night, neither of us mentioned dinner. Elsie was cleaning her glass at the sink, and I came up behind her, started rubbing her neck. She rolled her head, slowly accepting my touch, letting herself go. Her hair gave off some perfectly arranged floral bouquet and I took it in, imprinting it, casting it aside to reveal the stem-like column of her neck, slowly focusing my attention on the soft spot just below the ear, discovering her there. She let out her breath, turned, found me with her hand. Balanced up on the edge of the counter, opening her legs, tightening her grip, I traced her shape with my fingers. I found her everywhere. Pulling her hair back to lift her glossy lips, I ran the borders of her inner thighs. I took my time. And when she finally drew me in, spread-eagled, wrapping her legs around me, her slinky silk dress bunched around her waist, she kissed me—one hand on the counter, propping herself up; the other clutching the back of my neck. When she yelled my name, her eyes were closed tight.

That night, I couldn't sleep. When I tried to cradle up against her, she moved to the other end of the bed and turned on her side. She was asleep, but it still hurt.

I took the next week off—called in sick, every day. I followed her across town to the salon—a pedicure, a manicure, a massage—down to the Upper East Side, up to the twenty-seventh floor of the Seagram building to the office of Zdrojewski and Cellino where she took lunch—salad probably, a bottled water, maybe some nuts—at her corner desk, in between phone calls, and legal pads, and deadlines, every day from one to one-thirty, every

day except Friday. That day she hailed a cab on 53rd and Park Ave., and it dropped her off at a place called Café Frida's. He was there. The Doberman. I watched them leave, hand in hand, off like thieves in a shiny, black Coup de Ville. I followed them as far as a Ritz in Battery Park. There was no point in going inside. I'd found what I was looking for, and somehow it made me feel more prepared, as if I'd intercepted enemy code for the sake of saving myself some terrible loss.

But I was wrong. I still loved her, would have said nothing.

Hey, Desmond, you got that plane?

Yeah, I say. But before I take it over, I look more closely at the photograph. I see something different. The net. It's caught on something. He's bent over it, having trouble bringing it in as if it's tangled, somehow woven back in on itself, trapped underneath the hull. And there's something about the way the light hits the water, how it makes his net glow with life. Oliver. He's caught in it, his hand, his wrists, his arms—all of him. Coming, I say. But the sun's disappearing—off the edge, slipping below the waves, painting countless miles of sea in tiny crystal peaks. He's out there, searching the waters, filling some gap, struggling to retrieve something, something he can keep.

Gripping the tool in my hand, I tap Oliver on the shoulder. Oliver, I say. Here. But he's bent over, beveling the edge of a plank for a seamless fit. The light, beaming through a window overhead, washes over us, then dims, splitting us apart. Everything quiets except for the scraping of wood, the sound of a man building. But when I close my eyes, just then, I can hear those miles of sea lapping up against the hull of that boat, gulls clamoring above. I look down at my arms in that muted rinse of light, my hands. Fish curls up in a ball at my feet. Oliver turns and faces me, cocks his head, then turns away, gliding his fingers over a smoothed section of the frame. I start across the room. I come and I go from the throat of a cave.

Eleanor Roosevelt

by Bryan Beck

The first thing you should know is that this whole thing happened all of a sudden. Which isn't maybe the right way to put it. I mean I knew what I was doing when I was doing it. I said to myself, Well this really seems like the sort of thing that could bring something to life. Which it was. And then I did. What I'm saying is there wasn't any premeditation involved or anything of the sort. The photograph just seemed fitting. I mean I never said to myself, Someday if the situation ever arises where you could bring a picture to life it should be that one. The Eleanor Roosevelt one. I have plenty of pictures lying around I could have chosen from. My great-grandfather for instance. I never met him but have been told of similarities. Atavistic-like I mean. That would have been a good choice right there. Or Sparky, my old dog. I don't know anyone who wouldn't want to see their childhood dog again. Also I should make it clear that this wasn't any sort of fetish thing either. I know I shouldn't have to say it, but you never know what people will think. Justifiably too. I mean—I'm not trying to say that I never had any sexual fantasies about historical figures, or that Mrs. Roosevelt never made an appearance or two, just that that wasn't how it was on this particular day. The picture belonged to my grandmother, actually.

Anyway it was a Sunday morning. I was out in my laboratory working on some electro***. I used to be a scientist you see, had a job with the state. Local university later. So it's not that strange that I would be doing something like that, even on a Sunday morning. I used to go to church and all—Presbyterian—with the wife, but you know how it is. Things change. Plus after the chili incident and all.

Anyway I'm in the laboratory, which is more of a shed I've done some work on. I mean it used to only be a shed. Now it's got some counter space. Lighting. Sink. I did some rewiring so as not to affect the light or anything in the house if something went wrong. Added a fan for ventilation just in case. With the chemicals and all. Nothing too complicated. I like to call it a laboratory. Adds an air of formality. I used to have an assistant, when I worked with the state. Sometimes graduate students later. I'm by

myself now, so sometimes I get an idea in my head or I get started on something, and I take it a little farther than maybe I should. No one to stop me.

So I've got some wires connected to a conductor and I see what all's going on—reactions I mean—and I say to myself, By God, this is really the sort of thing that could bring something to life. I think it's pretty obvious why I chose a picture. There's already something about them that's alive to some degree. Like I said, I don't know why I chose the one of Mrs. Roosevelt. It just seemed fitting. Maybe I thought she'd have some stories worth hearing. It's a quality picture too. Professional I should say. Better than any of the others I've got. Plus an interesting scene, with her waving at some people you can't see.

So anyway I've got this eight-inch Eleanor Roosevelt running around on the countertop. I don't know what I expected her to do, so I can't really be surprised about that. Upset either. She's pretty scared—justifiably I guess. She sees all these modern scientific apparatuses around her and they're bigger than she is and then me there and I must be looking like a giant of some sort. Imagine how you'd react. She doesn't make any noise at all to begin with. She's just breathing heavily. Probably she's not used to it yet—breathing I mean. Also the air in the laboratory has a pretty interesting smell. Unique would be a nice way to put it. I'm a little nervous myself. I've got a lot of pretty valuable equipment in there. And who knows how much insurance would cover, especially in a situation like this. Plus she's kind of tripping on her own feet. Staggering might be a good way of putting it. Like she had been drinking, which surprised me a little. I mean it was a Sunday morning and all. She probably just wasn't used to her legs you know. After thirtysome years sitting on the buffet being two-dimensional. Part of me can't rule out drinking completely though. Her hair was all...disheveled.

She calmed down pretty fast though, and I give her credit for that. Maybe her social standing helped. I mean because she was used to dealing with stresses.

Anyway we got to talking.

What year is it, she asked.

2014, I said.

Oh my, she said. That means...the robots...

I was surprised she would know.

Yes, I said. We got a little somber here. I mean like you always do when you think about something you try not to often.

Well, she said. She had composed herself nicely. Like trying to make the best of it. Can we still dance the Charleston?

I'm sorry, I said. That was one of the first things they took away.

What We Lost in the Storm

by Helyn Trickey

ERNESTINE

Ernestine lost the only love note she ever received in her thirty-two years of life to a storm with a sissy name but a wallop as hard as a man's fist. The loss of it devils her.

Mostly, she has a hard time recalling exactly what Ray wrote first in his note. Was it the part about her being his one true woman? Or the part where he told her he had to marry Lorraine on account of the baby coming? She couldn't remember. And now the note, scrawled on a napkin from the Café Roux on Michoud Boulevard and left for Ernestine on her kitchen table, pegged down with a zucchini Ray had grown in his section of the community garden, is somewhere floating in the soup of black, oily waters from the Gulf of Mexico and Lake Ponchartrain when Hurricane Katrina swept ashore and flooded her home—and everyone else's, too—in the Lower Ninth Ward.

Ernestine misses reading the lovey words Ray wrote in that note. They made her feel all wrapped up in a soft newborn blanket. Before the storm, she'd read that napkin so often that the paper had begun fraying at the edges, and the worn line where Ray had folded it in half began splitting from itself. Before the storm, Ernestine would read a line and then hum around her kitchen like a bee, stirring a pot of rice here, kneading her hands through some biscuit batter there. She'd hum as she started a roux bubbling on the stove burner and deveined the shrimp, picking out the thin, dark blood line with her fingernail, for her étouffé. She read that one love note like it was her Bible. Another woman might've resented Ray mentioning his wife and soon-to-be baby in her only love note, but not Ernestine. Best of all, she likes the part in Ray's note about how her ample backside drives him crazy whenever he sees her dancing on the sidewalks in the Florida Project with her girlfriends during the block parties that seem to spring up spontaneously—like mushrooms after a hard rain—most weekends during the balmy summers, the August nights when locals know they're like to drown in their own sweat if they're foolish enough to cook and eat indoors. And she likes the part in Ray's note when he tells her he thinks of her most at sunrise, imagines her sleeping peaceful in her bed or

rising to make chicory coffee and sweet, hot beignets dusted in sugar. Most days, Ernestine misses that love note something bad. She misses it worse than her mama's house, now that it is nothing more than sticks and foundation, and more than their kitchen, which was the only place in the world where Ernestine felt herself. She misses that love note more than her clothes, though she is tired of wearing the same dungarees day in and out as she picks through the leftovers of her house in hopes of finding something familiar and whole. *Finding a good love note*, Ernestine thinks, as she reaches for her kitchen soup ladle, half-buried in the New Orleans muck, *would feel about as good as tunneling out from prison.*

ROOSEVELT

Today, around noon when the sun shines straight down and makes the shadows from the high piles of wreckage stumpy and fat, Roosevelt will take a break from cleaning up his rubble on Toulon Street to sit under the one oak tree left on his block and beat out a rhythm on the bottom of a plastic bucket with a short tree limb he's stripped and shaped with his pocket knife. He won't say a word, he won't sing. Roosevelt doesn't do either. He hasn't spoken a word since he saw his father die in a home invasion robbery when he was eight years old, hasn't said one thing since he crouched next to his father, placed his hand on the blood-wet t-shirt, felt the Bam! Bam! Bam! tympani drum of his father's heart fade away. After that there just wasn't much he wanted to say out loud. Now, Roosevelt will beat out a rhythm that he'd much rather play on his upright bass if only he could find his instrument buried in the ruins of his house.

In his fifty-nine years, Roosevelt has never lived more than three blocks from his mama's house on Lourdes Street. He knows every scowling alley cat—and that cat's baby's baby—between his and his mama's house; he can write directions to anyplace in the city using landmarks instead of proper street names; he can name the shop that was on the corner of Calais Street and Deauville Court before it was Elmo's Pawn Shop, before it was El Azteca Mexican Restaurant, before it was Navarre's Liquor Stop, and up until the storm—when it was a Pack' n' Save with bars on its windows and surly teenagers behind the counter. Now—three weeks after Katrina blew like a god down his street—Roosevelt doesn't recognize a house or a shrub or a street sign in his neighborhood. There aren't any cats lurking in any alleyways anymore.

Roosevelt misses it all, and is glad only of one thing: his mother is dead. If she hadn't fallen last year, broken a hip and died six months later in Charity Hospital on Tulane Avenue, this devastation would surely have been her death; that, and the loss of her son's instrument, his mouth, his voice, his vowels, his words.

Roosevelt has spent the last three days lifting pieces of drywall, stepping around jagged nails, digging in the coarse mud for any sign of it.

MAMA BABY

Damn, if my daughter isn't going to make me want to blow my head wide open with a shotgun before God puts the daylight out, Mama Baby thinks. Dumb girl. Moaning on about some napkin and fishing out kitchen utensils from the mud when there's plenty of heavy lifting for her to do—Ernestine's back stronger than mine by a mile—and the girl ain't even helping to find my Suwannee Marie.

Mama Baby looks to the horizon for the zillionth time that day. Even though it's been several weeks, she's still stunned that she can see the thin, inky line where land meets sky—the gaping, toothless hole in the world where oak trees draped in Spanish moss used to be rooted. *Lived here all my life, and I never seen that.* Mama Baby shakes her head. She wipes sweat away from the back of her neck and flaps her huge cotton shirt like a fan to move the air next to her sticky skin.

“Girl, you better put down that muddy ladle and start helping me clear some debris off this foundation.”

“Alright, Mama.”

Ernestine walks tentatively, placing one foot down on the debris heap, testing her footing by stomping and shifting her weight slowly onto each leg before planting her next step.

“Lordy, you're slower than a banana slug.”

“Faster than you.”

“Don't sass back.”

Mama Baby lifts her head into the air, ear cocked high. She raises the palm of her hand, chalky white and criss-crossed with dark lines. “Listen,” she whispers.

Ernestine sighs, and Mama Baby shoots her a mean eye.

“Hear that?”

Ernestine shakes her head.

Mama Baby looks over at their neighbor Roosevelt, who is two

houses down and leaning against a lone, scrawny tree, his eyes closed, and beating a bucket faster than the devil himself could drum.

“ROSE! You better stop that beatin’ before I come over there and give you the hidin’ of your life.”

Roosevelt stops his drumming, hands hanging in midair. Mama Baby cocks her head in the silence and holds her breath.

“That’s a dog’s bark. That’s my Suwannee Marie.”

A soft breeze, like a piece of lace, slips over Ernestine’s face.

“I don’t hear nothin’.”

“You ain’t listenin’ hard enough,” Mama Baby says. “That’s my precious girl coming back to me.”

#870254

An angry God says the walls of Jericho is gonna fall down around our ears, and He sure enough is right. The walls done fell. An innocent man walked free. And Joseph ain’t never missed the Orleans Parish Prison’s butter beans more than he does right now. Didn’t even think he liked butter beans—especially gray ones—but that’s what an institution will do to you, Joseph thinks. It’ll make you like, maybe even love, things that you didn’t even know you gave a rat’s ass about.

Turns out, freedom is fear. He hadn’t seen that coming. Prison had cell check and recreation time and even movie night when nobody had slit anybody’s neck that week, but the chaos of a God-made storm changed all the clocks in the Big House. Everything went crazy: not enough buses or handcuffs or leg irons for every murderer and liar in the place. After all the years Joseph spent dreaming about walking to freedom, a fantasy that mostly ended with a bullet to his back, he finds it was the easiest thing to walk away from the group of inmates left huddling like beat dogs on an I-10 overpass after the flood waters wrecked evacuation plans that seemed sloppy to begin with. The whole world has gone bat-shit crazy.

In Orleans Parish Prison Joseph was innocent. That started the day they clinked the cell shut on him. But as the warm sunlight beats down on his bones, whispering to him to lay, lay, lay down somewhere, anywhere—a ditch, a cul-de-sac, an abandoned front porch, in the ruin that had been his home as a boy—Joseph tries to remember the faded address where truth lives.

ERNESTINE

Ernestine sure hopes that dog is dead. It was stinky and half-gone before all this mess, anyway. White muzzle that looked like it was coated with milk. When the rescue boats that came after the storm stopped wailing, Mama Baby was more concerned with saving that low-slung nipples bitch than her own daughter. Ernestine remembers her mama trying to talk the rescuers into making room for Suwannee Marie. She saw Mama Baby look at where she sat in the boat, sizing up how much space her daughter was taking up with that big rump that Ray loves. Ernestine hopes that damn dog is dead, wrapped around a tree somewhere, flies buzzing in its eyes.

ROOSEVELT

He thinks he's found it, and his heart quickens in his chest—first for joy, but then out of fear that it won't be whole, that it won't be the same instrument it was before the big storm that caused the big flood that has made nothing easy about living in the Big Easy. Most of his friends call it his fiddle—*Hey, Rose! You bringing your fiddle tonight to the Bon-Bon?*—and Roosevelt never corrects them, never says a word, just smiles and draws a bow across the taut cat-gut strings and lets his upright bass bellow its own indignity, make its own correction.

Rose first sees the glimmer of polished oak as he lifts the splintered back door off a pile of debris in what used to be his mama's front yard. There have been moments in the last few weeks when he's become dizzy and disoriented, moments where he's stopped in his work and grabbed on to something, anything at all—a spoon, a door jamb, the skeleton bones of his mama's old house—to steady himself. It never helps. Rose still feels the sick in his stomach rise to his parched throat, sees sharp lights at the corners of his vision, feels the ground slant under his feet. In these unsteady moments, Roosevelt cannot determine his location. He can't tell if he's in his front yard or back, if he's facing where his mama's kitchen used to be or standing knock-kneed where the garage had been. Roosevelt can't tell north from east from south from west anymore, and it makes him pine for his bass even more. He longs to ground himself against that big-boned instrument, hover his cheek over the carved handle, feel the thumping notes ricochet off his body. He's hungry to play a few words, a sentence or two, later an entire book, strumming and plucking his way through his childhood, the games he played on sun-streaked streets with Wendell, Robbie, and One-Eyed Sam: marbles, hide-and-seek, and card games like Spades and Chase the Bitch.

Roosevelt longs to breathe deep into his chest, let his fingers fly over the strings, spinning furious notes like a spider intent on building a web, a constellation, an entire universe. Before he ends one melody, Roosevelt is already weaving the next, catching the end of something and molding it into a beginning, tricking and coaxing his strings into playing notes only he could have invented. He strums and plucks at his heart—an oyster that years ago felt the singular prick of sorrow, a sand grain, settle next to its vulnerable skin, felt the sandpaper rub against its chambered sensitivity. Roosevelt has coated the jagged grain with layer over layer over layer of an epoxy so strong that soon he can no longer feel the grain dig and nestle into his greatest muscle, can no longer detect the pinch of an interloper burrowed in his deep, soft, bruised oyster heart. Only years later does Roosevelt’s pain emerge as a translucent, singular pearl, a note that starts low, but strong, and grows until it becomes two and three and four round, juicy notes and finally a full symphony that weaves from his heart to his upright bass and back again to the softest place inside him. Finally, after sweat collects at his hairline in tiny, silver beads, Roosevelt slows his pace. He reaches for his long bow, and his cheeks—elastic and animated at the peak of his performance—relax into a hang-dog expression. His eyes go dull as blackened light bulbs. His slow notes cry out like cats.

Now, he is playing an exorcism. A note arcs toward the ceiling and hovers for a moment before tumbling; a long wail hangs in the air, a wild-animal call for his father, a man who years ago slumped to the floor in front of him, his face crumpling like a paper bag, his white t-shirt birthing a red stain over his heart.

ERNESTINE

Ernestine sure does miss Ray. Especially when the stars go twinkling around in the bruised light of day’s end. She misses him more when just weeks ago she might’ve been on her way anywhere—a girlfriend’s house or the corner store for some milk or Strega Nona’s where they serve white sangria in big, barrel glasses—and she might’ve run into him waiting for her in an alleyway or taking bets on the corner of Nemours and Grandville Streets. She likes the way he whips his head around twice whenever he sees her, the way he flashes his white teeth at her in a smile that rivals daybreak.

“Little Sister, where you think you’re headed?” Ray would call across the street at her. Ernestine’s heart would flop in her chest like a mullet.

"Nowhere," she'd smile and call back in a sweet tone.

He'd cross the street, and his hands would wrap around her hips like he already owned her.

"Why do women always say, 'Nooooo wheeere' when y'all is always goin' somewhere?"

Ernestine would shrug and smile into his face. His grasp on her hips would tighten, and she'd pray to all the saints she learned about in the St. Bernard Parish school that he'd keep on holding them, hold them tighter and squeeze his hands on her hips till he left bruises where his fingers were. She'd want his imprint on her, a souvenir to explore later that night, after the dinner dishes were rinsed and Mama Baby's snoring would tell her it was safe to strip down to nothing but her lacy panties and study her hips in her bedroom mirror, looking for Ray's thumbprint somewhere, anywhere on her body.

MAMA BABY

Lordy, who could be knocking at my door? Mama Baby pulls the frying pan of sizzling ground beef off the burner and settles it in the center of the stove where it won't burn. She tries to turn around in the small cooking area of her FEMA trailer, but the counters are too close, and Mama Baby has to inch sideways into the living area to the front door, where she leans into the frame, puts her big hands on either side of the peephole and peers through it. She breathes in, breathes out. This is an effort.

"I ain't know you," she calls through the flimsy door.

"Ma'am, I'm about starved. Please."

"Get away from my door 'fore I turn my dog loose on you."

"No ma'am, I can smell what you're cooking, and I know you ain't got no dogs," Joseph says through the door. He stands in front of Mama Baby's FEMA trailer in nothing but his drawers, a dark tarp draped over his shoulder and mismatched tennis shoes he'd found earlier in the day in the rubble.

"How you know I ain't got no dog? I could have a whole mess of Rottweilers up in here."

"Why ain't they barkin' then?"

Mama Baby was silent then. How could she account for the silence? If her precious Suwannee Marie were here, she wouldn't have no stranger standing at her door begging for her cooking.

"Get on, now. Ain't no food for you here."

Joseph turns his head to the left and right. "Listen, I'm hungry and you got food. It looks like you got some hard work to do here, some heavy lifting."

"Better get to where you're goin' with all this."

Joseph drops the tarp so he can show off his arms and chest. It is all the commodity he has. "I'm skinny, but I'm strong."

"Looks like you're not decent, either. Get on outta here," Mama Baby yells through the door.

Joseph gathers the tarp around his chicken-bone shoulders and licks his lips.

"Lookit, I grew up in these parts," he says. "This is my street."

Mama Baby is quiet for a moment. Finally, "You got kin around here?"

"Used to," Joseph says. "I grew up on Lourdes. Raised by my Aunt Helen, but she died ten years ago. Had a couple a cousins who lived around here, too, but I can't find anybody in all this mess."

Mama Baby stares hard into her peephole. She sizes up his face, his bony chest. She likes the set of his jaw line. He looks like he might be more help than lovesick, mopey Ernestine. "You say you can do some heavy liftin'?"

"Yes ma'am. Happy to." Joseph shakes his head. "I just need to eat."

Mama Baby cracks the door open a smidge and stares out at Joseph. "You ain't decent," she tells him. "You'll need to get you a shirt and some pants before I'll put a plate out here for you." She nods in Roosevelt's direction. "If I was you, I'd hit that man over yonder up for some clothes."

Joseph nods back at her, turns and squints in the dusky night to make out the dark blue silhouette of a man still picking through his yard by the light of a half-moon.

Mama Baby opens the door a little wider. "Put on some britches and both of y'all can come on back here for a mess of greens, gravy and dirty rice. Tomorrow you can start clearing my yard."

"Yes ma'am."

ERNESTINE

Ernestine comes home hungry from her evening walk and Mama Baby tells her that she's gonna have to go without much supper tonight as they are taking on a day laborer to help with the yard and he requires a meal. She's stinkin' mad when Mama Baby tells her this.

"Ernestine, I swear you is uglier than a homemade sin when you frown," Mama Baby says as she stands stirring a pan of sizzling beef, onions and peppers.

"I'm hungry, Mama," Ernestine tells her. "I been working all day."

Mama Baby shakes a spatula at her daughter. "We need some help to get this mess cleared, and you ain't goin' fast enough."

"Not fast enough?"

"That's right," Mama Baby says, turning down the heat on the burner and mixing cooked rice in with the greasy meat. "You're too busy moaning on about Ray this and Ray that. I need somebody with more muscle than mouth."

"Goddamn," Ernestine says to her, which makes Mama Baby red-mad that she takes God's name personal, but Ernestine is mad enough to spit nails, so she says it. Sometimes, Mama Baby makes Ernestine feel about as good as a Mason jar filled with dirty dimes.

"Mama," she screams, "I'm not some penny waiting on change."

DINNER

Joseph shows up for dinner at Mama Baby's FEMA trailer in a t-shirt and ratty shorts that he borrowed from Roosevelt, a man who never speaks. He waits by Mama Baby's door sniffing the air like a hound. Inside, he hears stomping around, and then the door flies open and Ernestine bursts out of Mama Baby's trailer like her hair is on fire.

"So, you the hungry dog that's eatin' up all our food," she nearly spits at him.

Joseph shrugs. He doesn't care who's mad about it, he is getting a meal tonight. His mouth is already watering something fierce.

Roosevelt appears over a heap of trash carrying the wrecked remains of his upright bass, the curved belly of the instrument gutted and splintered. He props the bass up against the trailer and sits down next to Joseph on a long board propped up by bricks to make a bench. Five feet away, in the sparse moonlight, Ernestine stands where her bedroom used to be, kneels to the ground and begins sifting through twisted metal and shards of wood. She is sure she'll find that note tonight, sure she'll get that warm, lovey feeling back in her belly.

Mama Baby opens the trailer door, and yellow light streams from the little trailer like a flashlight. It illuminates the ground where Roosevelt and Joseph sit together, upright and silent. Mama Baby balances several

plates in her thick hands, and as she steps down the first rickety step, she hears it again. A howl, mournful and low and hungry and lost, curls around the four of them, settles around their shoulders like a heavy blanket.

“Did you hear that?” Mama Baby looks to where the absent horizon should be. “That’s my baby coming back to me.”

Ooligan Press and the Publishing Program at Portland State University

Ooligan Press is a general trade press founded at Portland State University.

In addition to publishing books that honor the cultural and natural diversity of the Pacific Northwest, it is dedicated to teaching the art and craft of publishing.

As a teaching press, Ooligan makes as little distinction as possible between the press and the classroom. Ooligan Press is staffed by students in an apprenticeship program under the guidance of a core faculty. Acquiring, producing, and publishing profitable books in real markets become projects where students combine theoretical knowledge and practical experiences.

Publishing courses are open to both graduate and undergraduate students. The core curriculum leads to a Master's in writing with a concentration in publishing, through the English Department's Center for Excellence in Writing. Various levels of participation and responsibility in the press are available to degree candidates and other students.

The press is open to book proposals from inside and outside the university. Special editorial interests include

- *writing and the teaching of writing, editing, publishing, and book arts

- *new or rediscovered works with a social or literary impact and a Pacific Northwest connection, especially those giving voice to the frequently unheard

- *works for young adults and middle-grade readers

- *genres including fiction, non-fiction, and poetry

The press believes that all forms of publication should be considered, and all technologies used as appropriate.

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