

Harmonica, December 1990



Every night, Frank played harmonica for the cats.

Jake Bailey watched as the feral creatures emerged from the carcass of a 1978 Ford Granada, from the piles of fiberglass insulation beneath the skeleton of a trailer that had been immolated by fire. The cats were skittish around people, yet they came to his neighbor's yard each evening. At seven o'clock sharp, Frank would play his harmonica and put out cans of food, and the cats would gather and rub up against his legs.

The two would talk to each other, while Jake sat in a lawn chair on the roof of his trailer house. Jake's mother, Krystal, found it odd that Frank talked at all, told Jake that Frank was the shyest person in Quinn, the only permanent stranger in a town of 956. Unlike Frank, his mother was well known, and as a nurse, she was useful. His mother refused to wear any makeup, despite her thin lips. Krystal had enormous green eyes and glossy brown hair that hung past her shoulder blades, content to be a natural beauty. She wore her hospital scrubs at home, and no jewelry. Jake found it frustrating to shop for his mother.

Jake had been coming to the rooftop since he was seven years old, when Krystal stopped noticing what he was doing as long as he was in the yard. From the roof, Jake could see all of the trailer court and parts of the town. He was twelve now, and he no longer spied on his neighbors. After five years, he realized that they were gross. Now he came to the roof

for refuge. The space belonged to him, and he furnished it with a lawn chair and a waterproof tub that held his paperbacks, a parasol, and a pile of cassette singles. He sat on the roof through most of the year, sat there for hours, even in winter, when he sat until he could no longer bear it. His perch had revealed who was having affairs with the UPS man, who was eating too much when they thought nobody was watching, who was stealing checks from mailboxes. Jake was not a private detective, but he had a private-detective outfit. He also had several piles of polyester leisure suits and a complete set of motorcycle leathers.

Jake listened only to Madonna when he was on the roof. He listened to Madonna and watched the sky instead of the dirty loop of trailer houses; it was too painful to regard his tiny universe, the town seemed so fore-shortened and filthy. His Walkman had a voracious appetite, and Jake had lost many cassettes, had tried to repair the ribbon when it stretched and wound until it broke. He fixed most of them with a cunning little piece of Scotch tape, and it usually worked, only a little blip and squeal before the gospel choir kicked in during "Like a Prayer."

He had found rosary beads at the thrift store, and he wore these as he listened to Madonna, even though he was not religious. He wore three necklaces at a time: glass, baby-blue stones, and wood. He knew he was supposed to say a prayer and finger every bead, but instead he named his enemies. It seemed impossible that he had fifty-nine enemies, but the football team took up thirty-two, and there were twenty-seven other bullies and assholes in town. According to Jake's math, he disliked one-sixteenth of the town. Frank was not one of them.

The cats came around despite the freezing weather. Some nights, Frank built a tiny fire in a washtub. He played his harmonica, surrounded by piles of empty cans of cat food, and the flames shone on the tins and cast the snowy yard in waves of reflected light.

When Frank wasn't playing music, he recited facts and observations to Jake: the harmonica was the Special 20, model number 560 manufactured by Hohner, plastic comb instead of wooden. Frank told Jake that feral cats woke at four in the afternoon, that their hunting parties went out at six, and then they went back to sleep after he fed them. The cats woke

again at three in the morning, foraged for the next three hours, slept all day. Jake thought that they were much like Bert, Krystal's boyfriend.

Bert was a human barnacle that had attached itself to Jake and Krystal's trailer house in 1989. He courted them with shopping trips to Spokane, boxes of garage sale books, a new furnace for the trailer. He promised to be a father figure. As soon as Bert moved in, he never moved again, leaving the couch only to go to the bar. He was surly and possessive, drunk and useless, and worst of all, fertile. Krystal was pregnant within a month.

Before Bert came, Frank had built a small storage shed for Jake, shoved up against the siding, between the back door and Jake's bedroom window. Frank knew that Jake's thrift store purchases were piled to the ceiling in his bedroom, each article of clothing perfectly folded but sandwiched so tightly that Jake was constantly ironing. Frank worked silently, building the shed out of cedar, so Jake's clothes would smell less like old people and more like expensive people. He added a gambrel roof, sturdy enough to support Jake's weight. Now Jake could climb out of his bedroom window and use the roof of the storage shed to push himself up to the flat metal panels on the top of the trailer house.

After Bert moved in, Frank built a privacy fence around his entire property in the summer of 1990. Bert had started trapping Frank's feral cats in the alley, collecting them in metal cages. He drove to the boating launch and threw the cages in the shallows of the river. Bert described this process in detail but was secretive about what he did with the bodies. Frank's fence was six feet high, enough to shield Frank from the sight of Bert drinking in the yard, the sight of Bert entirely.

Jake's best friend, Misty, lived with her mother on the left side of Frank's new fence. They had grown up together in the trailer court, walking endlessly around the unpaved loop of twenty-six houses and a Laundromat, throwing rocks at swallows' nests. Misty blasted heavy metal at all hours.

Bert caused just as much commotion. When he had no one to fight with, Bert fought with himself, and loudly. Bert was the kind of drunk who fell on and off the wagon so many times that he called everybody at the bar by their last names and everybody at AA meetings by their first.

Frank was surrounded by this chaos but never called the cops. He was meek, a slight man with a thick dark beard. When he wasn't feeding the cats, he watched the mountains with binoculars. He told Jake that he used to spend his summers in the fire lookouts and that these habits were hard to break. He looked for fire, even in the winter. Frank wore only bright yellow work shirts and dark green pants, and he told Jake that he had retired early from the Forest Service but never explained why.

The week before Christmas, Jake combed through the thrift shop, found several suits that looked like they would fit. Frank was silent when Jake brought them to his front porch, wrapped carefully, freshly cleaned by hand.

"I guessed your sizes," Jake said. Frank said nothing, just accepted the neatly folded pile. "I thought you would look best in earth tones," explained Jake. "Browns and greens, mostly. You'll love the ties. I even found one with pine trees. There's also a gray-and-red plaid jacket, and I figured you could wear it with blue jeans. Do you own any blue jeans?"

Frank remained silent.

The next night, Jake took his place on the roof, careful not to trip on the wires of Christmas lights Krystal had draped over the gutters. He had finally bought the entire "Like a Prayer" album, and a different rosary for every track, upping his collection to fourteen. Plastic or pearl, he had a necklace for every song and wore them on the outside of his snowsuit. He wrapped himself in blankets; the lawn chair was covered in new snow, and he sat on a plastic bag so his pants wouldn't get wet. Frank began his concert for the cats, but ended it early after only twenty minutes. He blew into his bare hands, which must have been frozen; Frank could not play harmonica with mittens. The cats ate greedily, and Jake watched a skinny pair fight over a can of pork and beans. Inside the trailer, Jake and Frank could hear Krystal and Bert fighting about getting cable television, and their new baby was crying. Frank walked over to the fence and threw the harmonica up to Jake, and then he turned away and went inside his house, without speaking a word.

The ambulance came the next day. Krystal heard the details on the police scanner and told Jake to go to his room. He watched out his window

as the volunteer firemen came in their massive vehicles, followed closely by the van of the volunteer ambulance. There were no sirens. Then the cars came to the trailer court—the onlookers. It was as if every person who lived in town had heard the dispatch on the police scanner. Jake snuck out of his window and found Misty on the street. Even in the freezing cold, Bert lay drunkenly in the yard, tangled up in a lawn chair, but the crowd paid no attention. Misty and Jake hid in the alley, behind a Dumpster that was missing a wheel, and Misty smoked a cigarette as the volunteer fire department surrounded the stretcher.

Jake and Misty watched as they brought out Frank's body.

"I bet it was suicide," pronounced Misty. "That's fucking hard-core."

"He never told me he was sad," said Jake.

"I wonder if he used a gun," said Misty.

They watched until they were spotted by Krystal. "You shouldn't be seeing this!" she yelled at them as they tried to cower behind the Dumpster.

The winter grew thicker and darker, and Jake still thought of Frank. He kept the harmonica under his bed. Every morning, Jake shoved open the back door, kicked at the snow that had piled upon the cinder blocks of the back steps, and trudged in his slippers to the storage shed. He thought of Frank as he picked out his clothes for the day. Krystal would not speak of Frank's death, would not declare it a suicide. Bert claimed that the cats had eaten him.

For a few weeks, Jake bought cat food and stood in Frank's backyard. The cats came, but Jake could only hum. Jake hung his glass rosary on Frank's doorknob. The last week of January, Bert caught him and gave him a split lip for trespassing.

After that, Jake watched from the roof as the cats came around for a few more days, mewling and licking at the empty cans. Eventually, they found somewhere else to go. Jake hoped they were welcomed and serenaded, hoped they had found a new home.

By the time Jake's lip healed, there were no more cats. Bert had trapped them all, Frank was gone, and only the harmonica remained. Frank's yard and trailer stayed untouched, the snow piling in deeper drifts around the front door.

Fireman's Ball, 1991



Rachel Flood clutched her can of diet soda, flinched at the acid in her mouth, and counted the men in the fire hall she had slept with, all before she had turned seventeen. Not for romance, not in courtship; these had been numbed things, animal rutting. At the time, she hadn't cared that some were married. There were eight in this room. Or eight and a half, because she had once given a blow job to the fireman who was currently pumping the keg for her mother.

Nine years had passed since she had left town, and these men had become beasts: Phil Faciana, fifty pounds heavier, a beard that crept up just below his eyes, a werewolf face. Doug Applehaus, still handsome, but now with a crazy look in his eyes, wearing a long black trench coat, like an assassin or a sex offender. The Hagerman brothers, separated by three years but balding at the same rate, built like sasquatches then and now. Standing beside one of the barrels were two firemen she sort of recognized, but she knew she had screwed each individually at the drive-in theater in Ellis. She remembered their cars—an AMC Pacer and a Chrysler Cordoba, the former with no backseat at all, and the latter with a backseat as big as a couch. And there was Bud Neilson, in the shadows of the flickering light. He had been her first, old back then and even older now, face gray from chain-smoking or organ failure. He stood as still as a mummy, a taxidermied version of the man with whom she had lost her virginity,

although Rachel hated to think of it as something lost—she had been eager to discard it, like people born with a tail. She had been fourteen, a firehouse groupie, skidding on her cheap heels, slipping on the oil slicks from the fire engines, desperately offering up cases of beer stolen from her mother's bar.

Rachel was here to make amends, to show up and be a productive and helpful member of the community. Normally, her amends consisted of letters mailed to old lovers, police officers, women she had beat up for no good reason. But she could not write letters to the nine hundred people in her hometown, and so she had temporarily moved back to Quinn to make things right. Her sponsor had tried to get her to just accept it, to forget that her hometown had ever existed. But Rachel could not. All of the other steps were easy, even the sex inventory, but Rachel could not stop thinking of the entire town that hated her. She had decided to be a living apology, and do her time, until she could finally move on. It was necessary to be seen at this event, to let them all know she was back in town, to be of service, to right her name.

Rachel's own mother returned every amends letter she had written. The only letter not returned contained a check for one thousand dollars. Either Laverna Flood was psychic, or she read them all along, steaming and resealing the envelopes. The check was cashed. Rachel came to the fire hall to find her, figuring that although her mother would most likely be drunk, there would be witnesses, in case things took a violent turn.

Rachel was nervous as she regarded the fire hall, and it was an uncomfortable feeling. She felt no fear for more than a year, managed to replace it with her version of faith. Rachel didn't have much experience feeling things—it was only in the last few years that the suit of armor she had worn since junior high had begun to be removed, piece by piece. She hardened herself from an early age, to protect herself from an occasionally cruel mother and a constantly judgmental town. Feeling would have left her vulnerable, and she had no interest in being a victim. She needed to injure and destroy and move quickly, before she was caught and figured out. In the last year, most of her homework involved grace, and acceptance, and moving on. But she could not move on from this.

The fire hall was roasting, shimmering with heat from the two metal barrels stuffed with kindling and the cardboard detritus from cases upon cases of beer. Both garage doors were wide open—she could see the snow falling outside, the wind catching it and sending it into curlicues. The space smelled of heavy machinery and light housekeeping, of mouse-traps that were never emptied, bathrooms that only men would use. It was uncomfortably hot; she needed space, so she pushed herself through the crowd and found a place against a wall, the metal cool from the winter storm whipping around outside.

She stood there, trying to make eye contact. Few would look at her, and if they did, it was to stare and they seem startled. Hers was a face everyone in the room would always remember. She did not look like anybody else in Quinn, an alien among the rough, the common, and the interrelated. She was tall, broad through the shoulders for a woman, but her hips were narrow. She had big feet, and small breasts, and a stubborn mound of beer belly, even after a year. It was the only round part of her; she was a woman made of severe angles. She was a natural blonde and a notoriously cheap date, and at one time, she believed that these were her only redeeming qualities.

The volunteer firemen were celebrating their fortieth anniversary. Someone had decided that the Quinn Volunteer Fire Department was formed, more or less, in 1951. There had never been any reliable record keeping, but they had designated this night a special occasion. There was going to be a raffle for a gun. Rachel had been bullied into buying ten raffle tickets, at one dollar a piece, by four schoolchildren, filthy ones, who refused to leave her alone, despite her attempts to explain to them that she was a vegetarian and a firm believer in gun control.

The only other person standing alone was her new neighbor. As she had moved boxes from her truck, Bert Russell watched from a dirty living room window. Rachel had worked at her mother's bar as a teenager, and she had served Bert often. Even though Rachel sought out older lovers, the nine-year age difference was not enough for her to flirt with him, because he was short and coarse and homely. He had nothing she had wanted as a teenage girl, just a disability check. His thick nose hooked

down, nearly covering his grim mouth. When he got drunk, he sat at the bar silently, marinating in his past. All these years later, Rachel could finally sympathize.

She approached him carefully, stood next to him without speaking, as he drank and stared at the cement floor.

“I guess we’re neighbors now,” said Rachel. He glanced at her out of the side of one eye. “I didn’t know you were a fireman.”

“I’m not,” he said.

“How have you been?”

This was met with silence. Bert came from one of the oldest families in Quinn, and certainly the most tragic. He had earned the right to be taciturn.

“Gosh,” said Rachel. “I can’t believe it’s been nine years.”

“Stop talking,” said Bert. Rachel did not want to be seen alone. She remained standing next to him, because he was a native, and that offered her some cover. Bert’s father had been a hunting guide, specializing in finding black bears for drunken, fat assholes from the East Coast, and made thousands of dollars putting down the bears the tourists had grazed with bullets. They were terrible shots and too fat to chase the wounded bears. It was Bert Senior’s job to track them down and finish them off, sever the head or the paw. The souvenir depended on the cost of the package the fat asshole had purchased. Bert Senior left the rest of the body in the woods to rot.

Rachel tried to make small talk again. “I’m really here to talk to my mother,” she admitted. “I knew she’d be here.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” said Bert. Rachel regretted bringing up mothers. When Bert was seventeen, his mother went out to pick mushrooms in an area recently scorched by a small forest fire, and slipped on the new growth, cracking her head open on a bombed-out stump, bleeding to death overnight. The search lasted for a day, and Bert Senior shot himself in the head two hours after the memorial service. Bert had become an orphan in the span of five days. Instead of mourning, Bert had gone shopping. He blew his inheritance on a new truck and a trailer to haul his new speedboat. He forgot to tie it down completely, and it flew through the

air as he sped toward the lake, nearly killing the people in the car behind him. A month later, Bert's new truck and trailer were found upside down in the shallows of the Kootenai River, a truck-size hole blasted through the guardrails of the rickety bridge above. Bert became a cautionary tale, just like Rachel. Bert walked away from the wreck, left it there, knowing that someone else would have to clean up the mess. Rachel could identify with that as well.

Bert finally broke the silence. "I don't want to be seen with you," he said. He fled to the rear of the fire hall, and Rachel watched as the crowd parted for him. Enough time had passed that they did not whisper, but it was clear the town still worried that his speedboat of a mind was not completely tied down.

The heaviest drinkers never left the immediate vicinity of the kegs, sunk in garbage cans, slowly settling in their shawls of crushed ice. Rachel spotted groups of Clinkenbeards, Runkles, Giefers, and Dempseys. Ginger Fitchett kicked at a strand of crepe paper that had fallen from the ceiling, and lit a long and thin cigarette, the sole person in Quinn who smoked that brand. Ginger was the richest woman in town, owner of the Sinclair, the town's only gas station. She was drinking a wine cooler with Martha Man Hands, her longtime cashier. Martha was a Russell, somehow related to Bert, but her last name was unimportant. Ginger hired Martha and her truly enormous hands twenty years ago, and the nickname had stuck. Those hands and hairy knuckles were hard to ignore, as they handed back change for a twenty, or a corn dog in a greasy paper bag. Rachel's attention was captured as Tabby Pierce opened her compact, and the fires of the barrels flashed on the tiny mirror. Tabby powdered her forehead, shiny from the heat. Ten years ago, Tabby was hired to replace Rachel at the bar. She was also tangentially related to Bert, a toddler in the car that the airborne speedboat nearly destroyed. Tabby checked her teeth for lipstick and closed her compact, rejoined the noisy crowd. Rachel realized there was an order, groups were determined by genes, marriages, or restraining orders. Rachel's mother was among them.

Rachel had not seen her mother in nine years, but she had not changed one whit. Laverna Flood was on the short side, mousy-brown hair permed

and cut close to her head. Laverna's mouth was a severe line, the perfect accessory for the expectant look on her face. She owned the Dirty Shame, one of two bars in Quinn, and she had the face of a bartender, impatiently waiting for customers to make up their mind about what kind of beer they wanted, even though there were only three options, and they always ended up ordering the same thing anyway.

Rachel waved and tried—unsuccessfully—to catch her mother's eye, but Laverna was at least twenty feet away, and Rachel no longer threw lit cigarettes at people to get their attention. So she stared until her mother turned and regarded her with heavy, weary eyes. Rachel raised her diet soda in salute. Laverna turned back to her cabal of friends, one of whom was pushing the keg pump up and down so ferociously that her breast threatened to fall out of her dirty tank top. Judging by the size of the breast and the lack of bra, Rachel knew it was Red Mabel. This meant that Black Mabel was lurking somewhere else, and if nothing had changed in the last nine years, she was most likely selling painkillers in the darkest corners of the room.

A young fireman materialized before her. He was probably a senior in high school, because the QVFD recruited early, indoctrinated them as soon as their delighted parents signed the waiver, rolling their eyes at the very thought of liability. People in this town were immune to danger. There was always a bear or a drunk driver or food poisoning from salads made with mayonnaise.

This fireman had a squirrely disposition, and buckteeth to match. He twitched, rocked back and forth on his boots, but remained standing silently before her. He had probably been dared to do this, possibly by Laverna.

She took a sip of her diet soda. He remained silent.

"What?" She wanted this to be over as soon as possible.

"Dance?" His voice was deeper than expected. His face was bare of any whiskers or stubble, his sloe eyes lashed heavily, and for a split second, she wondered if she was being propositioned by a lesbian.

"Absolutely not," she said, and stared at him. He looked frightened, and then he extended his hand.

“My name’s Bucky,” he said.

“Of course it is.” She looked past him, toward her mother’s cabal, to see if they were watching all this unfold. She was reminded of the piles of mousetraps, rotting in every corner of the room. If this kid was bait, they could have done better.

“I’m a Petersen. I think you went to school with my older sister.”

“Jesus Christ,” she said. Rachel did remember her. The Petersen girl had been a chain-smoking cheerleader who got knocked up their sophomore year. She had been unfortunate looking, a giant head and a moon-shaped face, legs like stumps, the unshakable base of every cheerleading pyramid. This bucktoothed creature did not mention his cousin Billy, and Rachel was thankful.

“My sister warned me. She said you were a real piece of work. She didn’t tell me you were hot as hell.” He winked. She shuddered.

“Stop,” she commanded. She considered lecturing him about feminism, or sexual harassment. “Stop, or I’m going to kick you.”

“Can I get you a drink?” He gestured to the kegs, bobbing like buoys in the melting ice water. “You need to loosen up, lady.”

“How old are you?” Rachel didn’t really want to know the answer; she just wanted to steer the conversation away from alcohol.

“Nineteen,” he said proudly. He was so eager. “So can I get you a drink?”

“No,” she said. “But you can bring my mother a message.” She pointed at Laverna, just as her mother belched and leaned into the softer parts of Red Mabel. “Go tell her to come talk to me, or I’m leaving.”

“Why don’t you go tell her yourself?”

“Red Mabel wants to kill me,” she said.

“Oh,” he said. “She wants to kill a lot of people. She’s a real angry person.”

“Go,” she commanded, and he did.

She watched as he skulked away, clearly terrified, and she turned her attention to a red-faced couple attempting a lazy jitterbug, moving at half time, because the song was a ballad. They were the only dancers, although there was some movement from a few drunkards leaning up against the

wall, slightly swooning, heads bobbing like sloppy metronomes, eyes closed.

Rachel closed her own eyes but opened them quickly, sensing a threat.

Here was her mother, clutching her plastic cup of beer and looming dangerously, so close that Rachel could smell the Oil of Olay and the cigarettes on her fingers. Too close, especially after all these years.

“What?” Her mother’s voice was still the same, imperious and scratchy. “You’d better get out of here before Red Mabel sees you. There’s guns here.”

“I know,” said Rachel. “I bought raffle tickets.”

“You’d better start saving your cash, Miss Big City. That trailer house is a goddamn money pit.”

Rachel had received a slim letter. This was how she found out her father had passed away, this official notice from a lawyer naming her the sole beneficiary. She had barely known her father but still felt something inside her tear when she ripped open the thicker envelope that had arrived two days later—papers to notarize, two keys, a typewritten list of the things of value: a 1970 Fleetwood trailer house, a small lot in a trailer court measuring ninety-eight by two hundred feet, a Stihl chain saw, a 1980 Toyota Corona, and a checking account containing exactly \$2,034.08. She immediately called her AA sponsor and proclaimed it a sign.

“No,” her sponsor had said. “Not a sign. It’s estate law. That’s how it works.”

“I can’t help but think of it as fate,” Rachel had insisted. “It means something.”

“You don’t have to accept every gift you’ve been given,” her sponsor had said, somewhat coolly. “I suspect this one might have some strings attached.”

And it did. The strings were in her face at this very moment, and they had hot beer breath. Her mother extended a finger and poked Rachel in the chest. Rachel took a deep breath. This encounter would be unpredictable, a teeter-totter.

“The last time I saw you at a Fireman’s Ball, they had to scrape you off the floor. Could’ve used a giant fucking spatula.”

“I don’t drink anymore,” said Rachel.

“That’s what you keep telling me,” muttered Laverna, her shadow fifteen feet long, wobbling in the heat.

“I never told you that. You returned all my letters. I haven’t talked to you in over nine years.”

“Word gets around,” said Laverna, somewhat ominously.

“Well,” said Rachel. “I’m excited about the house.”

“I take it you haven’t met your neighbors yet.” Laverna cackled, and then she was gone.

Rachel wondered if her sponsor had been right, that this insistence on proving herself was a mistake. She glanced nervously toward Red Mabel, who fairly resembled a black bear, burly, all haunches. Her face got dark brown in the summer, but year-round her hair was massive and black. The people of Quinn called her Red Mabel because she had Kootenai blood. The people of Quinn had chosen black to distinguish the other Mabel, because of her rotted smile, teeth long dead from too many amphetamines and too little floss. Black Mabel was a drug dealer and a thief and a pool shark and a terrible drunk driver. Not terrible because she did it often, but because she did it so poorly.

Rachel had always loved Black Mabel. Both of the Mabels were barflies, but they were never seen together. There was a begrudging respect between them, a draw. Their personalities had arm wrestled and neither budged.

The Chief of the QVFD emerged from the restroom and nodded curtly at Rachel as he passed, drying his hands on the legs of his wool pants. He had several chins and was fleshy, but not fat. He was completely bald, and his eyebrows were each as thick as a thumb.

When Rachel had been a junior in high school, this man had been the grand marshal of the Fourth of July parade. He had ridden in the back of the oldest known truck in town, and Rachel had been behind him, clomping down the streets in the marching band, attached to a bass drum, the harness pinching into her shoulders with every step. He was chosen to be the grand marshal that year because he had put out the most chimney fires in one winter, more than any volunteer who had come before him.

A creature with no eyebrows approached Rachel, chomping gum, fearless. Della Dempsey. Rachel could never forget such a face, smooth brow like a burn victim.

“Rachel? Rachel Flood?”

Rachel sighed and shook her head. “I don’t know who that is,” she said. And it was true, in a way. She would not have to call her sponsor; she did not tell a lie. After she sobered up, Rachel had no idea who she was anymore. She didn’t know what really made her happy. She was figuring it out as she went along.

The Chief yanked at an extension cord until it dislodged itself from the wall, and the music stopped, mid-song. In the corner, the lone couple continued their clumsy dance. Della waited for Rachel to say something, anything, but just like in high school, Rachel stared right past her.

He stomped to the center of the room and pulled a flashlight from his back pocket, illuminating the cement around his feet.

“Raffle,” he announced.

One of the volunteer firemen leaped to his feet, coming forth from the shadows, clutching a coffee can that was filled with ripped halves of ticket stubs. A brand-new rifle was slung across his back.

The Chief barked again: “Remington Model 870 Super Mag twelve-gauge shotgun.”

Rachel did not know what most of this string of words meant; it sounded like an incantation, a curse.

“Check your stubs,” said the Chief, and that was it. He was so nonsense that Rachel was absolutely certain she had never had sex with him. She never had sex with men who knew what they were doing.

The Chief pinched a half ticket between his giant fingers, shone his flashlight and squinted.

“Six-two-seven,” he proclaimed. The revelers examined their numbers.

Some people had entire handfuls of ticket stubs. Others bolted out the door to grab tickets from the jockey boxes of their automobiles. This was going to take some time.

Rachel tried to make herself as small as possible as she slunk toward the exit.

“Six-two-seven,” bellowed the Chief again, obviously annoyed, as purses were emptied onto the floor, and hands were jammed deeper into pockets of blue jeans, digging desperately.

Rachel had memorized the string of salmon-colored tickets she had bought from the schoolchildren. They had been attached to each other, spun off the roll in one long chain, numbers 624 through 634.

“Six-two-seven,” shouted the Chief. She could hear the exasperation in his voice as she passed him, as she made her way out into the cold, clear night. A small brown dog darted away from her, no collar, no tags. The dog ran under a fire truck as she approached. Even the strays of this town were frightened by Rachel Flood.

She walked across the frozen gravel. She'd never had luck of any kind. She supposed she was lucky that she had escaped this town. But that had not been luck—Rachel had been driven out. There probably would have been townspeople coming after her with torches, if it hadn't been fire season.

Sweet Thing



Laverna woke with a hangover, and her shoulder hurt. She blamed both on her daughter. She lay in bed, kicked at an empty can of beer caught in the folds of the quilt. It flew from the bed and rolled across the floor, came to a rest as it wedged between her high heels. She planned to never wear those heels again. They were impractical, and she fell several times at the Fireman's Ball.

Today was her birthday. There was a hair in her mouth, and it tasted like home perm.

In the kitchen, Laverna made a pot of coffee, toilet paper stuffed where the filter should be. She smoked her first cigarette of the day—her first cigarette at age forty-seven—and grimaced. It wasn't that she thought forty-seven was old, just inconsiderate, a bad thing that happened to good people, like home perms.

As the coffee brewed, Laverna dressed for her shift at the bar. It was nearly three o'clock in the afternoon. She dug out a pearl-colored blouse, a black pantsuit, a gauzy black scarf. She pulled on thin nylon socks, slid a black velvet headband across the pelt of her hair, and stepped into black loafers with no heel whatsoever. Laverna always dressed in layers, even in the thick of August. Red Mabel accused her of dressing like she lived in constant fear of strip poker. Laverna cursed when she realized she had forgotten her control-top panty hose, removed her pants and started over

again. This was forty-seven. Nine more hours and it wasn't her birthday anymore, not that anyone would dare mention it. In the bathroom, she penciled her eyebrows, added more arc than usual. She considered curling her eyelashes, but her hands were shaking, and besides, it seemed excessive, and she was supposed to be in mourning.

She returned to the kitchen, sipped at her coffee and smoked another cigarette. Laverna stared out the window into the front yard. It all looked the same to her in the winter, a rerun. She hated the winters here. The only thing moving outside was smoke from wood stoves. Winter in this town trapped people in their homes, in their lives. It was no wonder trains didn't stop in Quinn anymore. Only derailed.

Laverna drove to work past the softball field, covered in snow. She slowed the Cadillac, as she did every day in the winter, making sure that everything was in its right place. She was very protective of the softball field; it was the only place that made her happy, although last season had been a catastrophe. They had won only three games, and one was by default—the entire opposing team of silver miners had gone to a Heart concert in Spokane.

The Dirty Shame was converted out of a row of railroad apartments. It was sided with oily wooden shingles that Laverna's father acquired at an outrageously low price. She took after her father; Gene Flood could talk a dog out of having rabies. He grew enormously fat after they opened the kitchen and started serving food at the bar. He died of a heart attack at one of Quinn's softball games, which was embarrassing enough, but the fact that it took six volunteer firemen to haul him away from the bleachers was mortifying. A week after the funeral, Laverna's mother answered the door and made the mistake of inviting Jehovah's Witnesses into her home, confusing them with mourners. Before a month passed, she sold all the video poker machines and fled to eastern Montana with the money and her new congregation. At twenty-two, Laverna became the owner of the bar, and twenty-five years passed, changing out kegs and breaking up fights.

Tabby threw her apron at Laverna the minute she walked through the door.

"It's all yours," she said. And it was. Of the two bars in town—Laverna

proudly owned the one that served food and encouraged fighting. The other bar was the Bowling Alley, an unoriginal name but frequented by most of the volunteer firemen and folks from town who had tired of fist-fighting over the conservation of the spotted owl. The Dirty Shame was always packed with loggers, men from the highway department, and the female silver miners. The miners were her most devoted customers, so Laverna tolerated the constant cloud from their boots and their pants, piles of powder in the dustpan. The silver mine seemed to only employ dwarf-size men and giantess lesbians. The lesbians were tougher than anybody else in town, so people held their tongues.

At six o'clock, Red Mabel installed herself at her usual stool as Laverna wiped down the taps and made a fresh pot of coffee. A silver miner, already quite drunk, stood at the end of the bar waving a twenty-dollar bill. The woman looked like Fred Flintstone.

Laverna sighed. "What?"

"Can I get a White Russian?"

"Too much work," said Laverna. "It's beer or nothing. I'm in mourning." Laverna sighed again. Frank's death was recent enough for her to get away with such a statement. They had been divorced for two decades, but Laverna would capitalize on any grief to get out of making a mixed drink. Frank rarely crossed Laverna's mind. He had already become a ghost, as fleeting as wood smoke, long before he died. She always knew he would derail, but there was no conductor asleep at the wheel, no negligence. Frank had crashed his own train.

She had met Frank at her first and last yard sale. This is what he bought: A toy logging truck missing a wheel. A Pat Boone album. A mountain lion carved from a piece of cottonwood tree. A boot warmer. Laverna's bowling ball, bowling shoes, and wrist guard.

Frank had held the bowling ball, palmed it like a thick-knuckled fortune-teller, and smiled shyly.

"Now that's a sweet thing," he said, and paid with cash. They were married four months later. He was a stranger in town, a precious thing. Laverna was not going to let him get away. She was surprised that her daughter had shown up to claim the inheritance. Laverna thought of

Rachel the same way she thought about the time her appendix had burst—sometimes things could come from inside your body and suddenly betray you, nearly killing you.

Once upon a time, Laverna trusted her daughter to work at the Dirty Shame, found a lucrative use for all of that lasciviousness. Rachel brought in her own crowd, and the local cops looked the other way, ignored the fact that she was only fifteen. Rachel was a terrible bartender, but fantastic at playing the ingénue cocktail maker, at flirting with her hair. Laverna's weekend numbers tripled in size. Now it remained a dead zone, and Laverna couldn't care less. Her daughter had burned her, set her life ablaze. There would be no forgiveness, only ashes.

Red Mabel turned around on her stool and launched a cue ball at a group of dusty women who were playing truth or dare. The ball smashed into the pint glasses, shards and liquid flying everywhere.

Cackling, the miners responded by hooting and grabbing at their crotches. The miners were more feral and violent lately, and if the rumors were true, emboldened by drugs. Laverna didn't care what they were buying from Black Mabel, as long as they continued to spend money at the bar. Red Mabel's fits only exacerbated their recklessness. The miners were itching to fight someone their own size. Laverna threw the bar rag at her best friend.

"Those bitches are out of control," protested Red Mabel. "You should make them clean it up."

"I really wish you'd stop breaking things," said Laverna. "I'm in mourning."

Black Mabel staggered through the front door, eyes unseeing, bombed on pills. As usual, she had embraced her nickname, wore a black T-shirt underneath a pair of inky work overalls. She wore that cursed leather duster, dark as night, and much too big for her. She wore it every day, even in the summer. It swept across the floor, filthy with old mud splatters, the hem soaking wet from the snow. Black Mabel's feet were invisible, and as usual, she seemed to be levitating. Her face was shockingly white, surrounded by the massive collar and lapels she turned up against the wind. While Black Mabel dressed to instill fear, Red Mabel would just as soon

punch you in the face. Red Mabel guzzled the rest of her drink and left in disgust. As she passed Black Mabel, Red Mabel elbowed her in the arm, but she didn't seem to notice.

The bar was more rowdy than usual. One card game had dissolved into arm wrestling in bras, and Laverna saw two of the women pass a green olive to each other on their tongues. The men from the highway department cheered at this. Laverna sent Black Mabel over to admonish the women, and watched as she ducked a shower of peanuts the drunkest silver miner threw. When Black Mabel returned, Laverna gave her a piece of beefjerky.

"I always wanted to be a miner," slurred Black Mabel. "My mother was a miner, and both my cousins." Laverna took a drink of coffee, and raised an eyebrow. This was a story she had heard many times before. "I couldn't cut it," continued Black Mabel, looking over at the table of exhibitionists as they draped themselves over the jukebox.

"Mining is hard work," said Laverna.

"I'm claustrophobic," said Black Mabel. "I went down the shaft on my first day and burst into tears."

By eight o'clock, Laverna had officially lost control of the crowd. She called Tabby for backup, because Tabby was always hungry for tips and lived only a block away. The rest of her barmaids were probably unconscious somewhere.

Of all people, Rachel had been Laverna's most dependable barmaid. When Rachel was fifteen, Laverna had fired her entire weekend shift, both girls, for stealing from the cash register. Laverna was the law of the town, and a penny-pincher, so she installed her excited fifteen-year-old daughter behind the bar on weekend days, and the money flowed. Laverna didn't care if it came from pedophiles. Rachel had been a natural—imperious and saucy and a quick learner. Laverna eventually stopped shadowing her, and for two years, Rachel transformed two of the slowest shifts into moneymakers. When Rachel was exiled, bookkeeping was the only time Laverna missed her daughter.

A man pushed his way through the crowd at the front door, nodding at each and every miner. They glared at him as he passed, at his Quinn

Volunteer Fire Department polo shirt. His eyes were locked on Laverna. He sat down next to Black Mabel and inched his stool away from her, to show some respect. He smoothed out a ten-dollar bill with his index fingers and propped his elbows on the bar.

“Scotch,” he said.

“We’re out,” Laverna said, and wiped her hands with the beer rag.

“Beer,” he declared. “And keep the change.”

Laverna studied him closely. He was vaguely handsome, and looked more capable than the other firemen she had known. His polo shirt was unwrinkled, tucked into his pants.

“Thanks,” Laverna said, and poured him a beer and placed the pint before him. He raised his drink to her.

“Jim,” he said, and stuck out his hand. “I’m new in town.” He stood up, and she had no choice but to shake. “I’ve been wanting to make a proper introduction.”

“He’s the new Jim in the department,” offered Black Mabel. “Jim Number Three.”

Laverna rolled her eyes and went back to the crush at the bar. Laverna did not like the volunteers in town, especially the firemen. They had enormous egos and couldn’t keep it in their pants.

Frank had never come to the bar, even after they were married. He left her every June to spend five months in the woods at the Forest Service lookout, came back in November, left again in January. He spent winters maintaining snowmobile trails, not looking for forest fires, yet he returned to Quinn one April to a woman enflamed. Laverna had missed two periods.

Frank took to sleeping on the sunporch, and this was where he stayed through a ferociously cold April, shielding himself with a space heater and piles and piles of sleeping bags.

Rachel was born in September 1964, and Laverna’s cold, cold heart warmed when they handed her the baby. Frank was not present at the hospital—he stayed on the front porch, working his way through another Louis L’Amour. When they brought the baby home, Frank smiled for the first time since the yard sale. And for a while, anyway, he did make

some effort—he bought a crib at an auction and played the harmonica for the baby, who seemed to enjoy it. He knit a tiny pink afghan on the front porch, a skill nobody knew he had.

They passed two years this way. Frank wasn't a doting father, but he tried his best. He built Rachel a mobile of airplanes from tin-snipped beer cans, which hung above her crib until Red Mabel pointed out that if it fell on the sleeping baby it would dismember her. He gave Laverna his paychecks, stayed out of her way, occasionally cleaned Red Mabel's guns. When he decided to leave, shortly after Rachel's second birthday, he gave no clear reason why, maybe because Laverna didn't ask for one. She needed the sunporch for storage anyway, had thought about learning how to make jellies and applesauce for the baby; the woods were thick with huckleberries, and she needed the space for canning.

Frank bought a trailer house on the outskirts of town. The checks came every month, and Frank kept to himself—Laverna got a child out of the deal, and as a businesswoman, she determined that all accounts were settled.

When Tabby arrived at the bar, Laverna made a big production of wiping the nonexistent sweat from her brow, poured herself a greyhound, and limped away to the only free table in the back, carrying a bar rag with her so it looked like she still intended to do some work. She put her feet up on the chair, and watched Jim Number Three push himself off his barstool. He looked embarrassed as his boots crushed the shells of peanuts. Wiping his hand on his jeans, he pulled up a chair across from her.

“Howdy,” he said. “Mind if I join you?”

“You could rub my feet,” said Laverna.

“I'm a volunteer,” he stated. “But that doesn't mean I do charity work.”

“How many fires have you been on?”

“Four,” he said as he sat down.

“Jim Number Three, you are a true hero.” She sipped at her greyhound and did a quick head count of the miners. She liked to keep a tally while they drank. When they disappeared, bad things tended to happen.

“They were chimney fires,” he said.

“Chimney fires can blaze out of control,” she offered.

“Not these ones,” he said.

Laverna excused herself to pour another greyhound. The door swung open, and Bert Russell emerged from a curtain of snow suspended in the howling wind. The door eased shut behind him, and as usual, he avoided looking at Laverna. She checked the expiration date of the grapefruit juice, and interrogated Tabby about Jim Number Three.

“Who is he?” Laverna topped off her drink with a maraschino cherry, just because it seemed like a flirtatious object. She hadn’t flirted in years, except for tips. But knowing that her daughter was back in town, Laverna was determined to trap him as soon as possible.

“Never seen him before,” said Tabby. “He’s cute, though. You’d better stake your claim.” Tabby pulled the fresh pint glasses from the dishwasher. She put a hot pint glass in front of Bert and poured the remnants of a pitcher into it. The beer was so cold that it cracked, the pint glass exploding, and the beer ran down the bar and into Bert’s lap. Tabby apologized profusely, and Bert said nothing, which was typical. He moved his barstool over and let the beer drip onto the floor. Bert wasn’t one of Laverna’s favorite customers, so instead of handing him her rag, Laverna returned to Jim Number Three.

Jim Number Three flinched when Laverna threw the bar rag past his head. One of the silver miners was on the verge of vomiting, as the rag landed on the floor near the card game. The silver miners cursed when the tallest one unleashed three kings.

“You lose,” said the tallest woman. “All of you.” She tapped powder out of her boots with a beer bottle, flipped over the pile of cards that were out of play.

The vomiting began, and Laverna called for the pail of sand, kept behind the bar.

“TABBY!”

Tabby struggled to carry the metal pail, and Jim Number Three ducked when she nearly hit him in the side of the face.

“I try to keep this place respectable,” said Laverna. Jim Number Three nodded.

The miners were silent as Tabby grabbed a handful of sand, sprinkled it across the mess on the floor. They knew they had done wrong.

“Welcome to Quinn,” Laverna said, and raised her greyhound. Jim Number Three lifted his pint glass in return, seemingly unfazed by the body fluids on the floor. Usually, it was blood. Laverna wondered if her luck had changed, if this new man might be a gift worth keeping. It was her birthday after all.