

JUNE, DOLORES, JUNE

June

January 1, 1970, Charlie Glover rose early despite having stayed up late with the wife, waiting for the ball to drop in Times Square. It had been June's idea to welcome in the New Year "one last time." Charlie suggested they celebrate at the B.P.O.E. for old times' sake. "We might as well get drunk," he said. "What's the difference?"

"Don't use me as your excuse," June said. "Rent a room and tie one on."

"You'd know all about that, wouldn't you?"

"I have done my best to forget, and I advise you do the same. Every little stroll down Memory Lane you're liable to step on a snake."

They had stopped attending meetings years ago, June saying, "I'm wore out on the funny stories about waking up in a ditch wondering what you done with your shoes." Twice a year, they had their own, separate "birthdays." June baked a pan cake and they lit candles and held hands. Just the two of them sitting at the kitchen table, munching cake, drinking coffee. Lately, Charlie wondered if they should celebrate earlier. June

wouldn't have it. "That would be breaking the rules," she said. "I'll be there, don't you worry. I'll wear a bow in my hair if I got any left."

They fell asleep before the ball dropped, June on the sofa and Charlie in the big green chair that smelled of cat piss. Mutt had used to get it in his head to spray his favorite chair lest Charlie start thinking it belonged to him. They'd had the worst luck with pets. Mutt lasted two years before Charlie found him dead in the street, a couple of blocks from the house, run over by a car. They buried him behind the garage, a regular little cemetery where they had already buried two dogs and now Mutt, their only cat. "No more pets!" June said. "I'm done with grieving over dead animals!" A few weeks later she picked up a stray shepherd mix that was hanging out around the beauty shop. "Is that not the prettiest dog you ever saw?" she said. "I think I'll name her Marilyn." She named all her pets after movie stars and cartoon characters.

"Call her Lynn," said Charlie. "Marilyn is too much name for a dog."

They took Lynn to the vet when she began to cough. The vet listened to her chest with a stethoscope and announced that the dog had heart worms. Big beautiful blonde, big brown eyes that filled up with love every time she looked at you. Charlie bought a bottle of chloroform at the drugstore. When the pain got so that even June was ready to let her go, he carried Lynn out behind the garage and held a cloth over her snout. That was last year, before they found out June was sick.

When Charlie woke the party was over. An air force jet was speeding across the screen, a voice claiming to have "touched the face of God." Charlie lifted June from the sofa, toted her into the bedroom, eased her into the bed. Feeling it in the old sacroiliac, he was. He dropped his pillow onto the floor and knelt and prayed best he could, just like everything else he'd ever done, not very well. How high does a man have to fly to

touch the face of God? He had been a fair-to-middling carpenter, always stuck on the framing crew. In his youth he'd tried his hand in the ring, club fights mostly, and county fairs here and there, sometimes going at it with bare knuckles, anything for a buck. Now he had a cauliflower ear and the bent nose, and his choppers were in a cup of water on the bed stand. He had never touched the face of God. He prayed, not very well. Just never got the hang of it. June's preacher told him begin with his sins, but Charlie was never one to beat around the bush. It wasn't forgiveness he was after, he wanted a miracle. So he thanked the Lord for all his blessings, summarizing, and asked if it wasn't too much trouble could He lift up the wife and shake out the sickness from her bones?

When he woke New Year's morning he was dreaming. Something ugly. He lay awake trying to remember the dream and let it go and inched over to the side of the bed and holding on to the bed stand levered himself up. Already he could smell the bathroom. Crept barefooted around the foot of the bed on the cold linoleum floor. June slept hard, each breath a knotty rattle in her lungs. When the pain woke her, or the nausea, she would crawl out of bed and do her business and drink more of the syrup. Charlie knew people from when he lived hard. He could buy anything.

The stench smacked him in the face as he entered the bathroom. *Dammit*, he thought, and said, "Dammit," under his breath.

He stood over the toilet holding his breath, straddling a slick. Peed and flushed. Backed carefully, bow-legged over the slick, June's snore rattling as he went into the dirty clothes for a rag. When he knelt to clean the floor and the toilet bowl, the pain shot down his hip into his knee. He shuddered. *Sack-saack-ro*. Dolores, the first wife, would have known how to spell it. Woman could spell the dictionary. He wiped the linoleum floor, dammit, and rinsed the rag in the toilet, dammit. He sneezed. Tore off some toilet

paper and blew his nose, his mind jumping around the way it did, the odor filling his head with smelly memories. We were happy once. Weren't we happy?

He gripped the rim of the toilet bowl and pushed. *Oh, the back!* He blamed the sheet rock. When he took up with June, she was still backsliding, fired from a half dozen shops for failing to show up for work, or showing up drunk. When framing was slow Charlie would take any work he could get to make ends meet. Roofing, drywall, even a plumber's helper digging ditches. He figured it was the drywall done it to his back. He was strong as a bull, could sink a ten-penny nail with two whacks of a framing hammer, but, shit, *drywall?* He peed again once he was standing. He was sixty-nine, two days younger than the century. Live long enough, you get old, he thought.

He made coffee and sat at the kitchen table smoking, not thinking, staring at the spot in the corner where Mutt had killed and swallowed a mouse. When he heard the bed squeak he lit a burner on the stove top and set a pan of water on it. She would be in the bathroom for a while, taking care of business, and then she'd make herself up. *So I don't look like I'm already dead*, she'd say. A few minutes later, she shuffled into the kitchen holding a pack of Raleighs.

"How do you feel?"

"I'm dying, Charlie. How do you think I feel?"

"I made oatmeal."

"I can't eat that stuff anymore."

"Here. Drink some coffee. You got to eat, honey."

"I don't got to do nothing except die." She lit a cigarette and smoked a minute, blew on the coffee and sipped. "Oh, hell. Give it here."

Charlie uncovered the pan on the stove and watched the steam rise. He spooned oatmeal into a bowl, poured condensed milk over it, and sprinkled it with sugar. "This'll perk you up," he said.

June spooned oatmeal into her mouth and swallowed. "I seen where you cleaned up the bathroom."

"It wasn't nothing."

"You missed a spot."

"I know. That's how come I left it, give you something to fuss about."

She stared into the bowl of cereal, holding her cigarette in one hand, the spoon in the other, idly stirring. "It was a mess. I am so sorry."

She wore a scarf over her head. Charlie watched her face, trying to remember when she was pretty.

"It wasn't nothing you could help," he said. "Here. Eat some more before it gets cold." She had dropped the spoon on the table. Charlie picked it up and dipped into the cereal and held it out to her.

"Gruel," she said. "You know that word?"

"No. I guess I do now."

"I read it in a book in school. Ugly word. All the little orphans had to eat gruel."

"The orphans," Charlie said.

June winced, Charlie always slow on the uptake. "In the book," she said. "You were an orphan."

"I was never in a book."

"I didn't say you was. What I said, I read this book in school. You never listen, Charlie."

“I heard you. The little orphans ate gruel.”

“They had to steal.”

“They threw me over.”

They smoked together, Raleighs. They saved the coupons. June said, “Who threw you over?”

“My parents. Who was we talking about?”

“Nobody said nothing about your parents.”

“Have it your way. How did I become an orphan my parents didn’t throw me over? They turned me out is what they did.”

June squinted at him the way she did. Charlie lifted the spoon to her mouth. “Eat your gruel before it gets cold.”

She ate more of the cereal, smoking her cigarette between bites.

“That’s my girl. That’s the spirit. You would’ve made a great fighter.”

She tucked the housecoat around her and shivered.

“That’s what they say at all the funerals. *She was a fighter. She never gave up. Shoot. I give up every day.*” She lit another cigarette. “Every night I pray I won’t wake up. Is that courage? Is that a fighter? I’m ready to die but I want to go easy. In my sleep. But when I wake I want to live. I take my medicine and smoke another cigarette and eat my goddamn gruel.”

As she lifted the cigarette to her mouth, the terrycloth sleeve slipped down her veiny arm. Her arms were bruised. The bruises in their phases a swirl of colors, blues and blacks leaking into orange blossoms, fading a livid grey. *Blossoms*, she called them. *Oh my, another blossom. My skin was pretty, so fair, remember when I was fair and pretty?*

She held the cup in both hands, a tremor in her fingers, the cigarette in her right hand having formed, and held, an ash half its length. She brought it to her lips, sipped. The ash broke, tumbled into the remaining milk in the cereal bowl, coloring it.

“What will you do with all the coupons?”

“I hadn’t thought about it,” Charlie said.

“We got a drawer full. I bet I smoked enough of these things to buy a Cadillac.”

“Maybe a new fishing reel.”

“Since when did you fish?”

“I would if I had a nice rod and reel.”

June touched his hand, tracing the scars on his knuckles, the scarred nub on the index finger. “You can have it,” she said. “I want you to have whatever you want.”

“Don’t start it,” Charlie said.

“You lifted me up. You saved me, Charlie.”

For this, he thought.

June fingered a bruise on her wrist, another blossom. “I’m ready, Charlie.”

“It ain’t no hurry. I been praying.”

“For what? It’s not like I’m being kicked out of Paradise.”

Charlie helped her stand, her frail bones hard and sharp under the robe, her slippers scraping the linoleum. She clutched a handkerchief in one fist. She tucked her cigarettes and a pack of book matches in a pocket of her robe. He arranged the ashtray and her cigarettes and matches and medicine on a coffee table he had built from scrap lumber. He brought her a glass of water and the syrup.

He went into the bedroom and came out wearing his old duck-cloth jacket and the cap with the ears that snapped across the top. He placed the brown bottle on the table.

"I set the TV on Channel Three," he said. "I'll turn the antenna before I leave."

"What are you fixing to do?"

"I don't know, drive around. I could stay. Let me stay."

"No. I want you to leave. I want you to go see Wendell."

"I ain't studying Wendell," Charlie said.

"He's your boy. I don't want you to be alone, Charlie."

"Wendell was a sweet kid, but he grew up to be hard and sour."

"There is some good in everybody."

"I have yet to find it in Wendell McCreary."

"It won't hurt to talk to him, see your grandson."

"It'll hurt, all right. He'll see it hurts. He never forgave me Dolores."

"Dolores is dead. I'm fixing to be dead. Wendell and his boy is all you got."

"In which case I am sucking hind tit."

She held his hand in her icy hands. "Go see him, Charlie." She clutched at the neck of the robe. He could smell her.

From the television set the announcer waxed enthusiastic about a float in the New Year's Day parade. A woman's voice said, "That's right, Dick!"

Charlie sat beside June and pulled off his cap and fiddled with the snaps. He could smell her. He could smell the green chair. He lit a cigarette to cover the odors. "I wished I could've made you happy," he said. "I'll always love you, June. Always."

"That's what they say."

“I’m saying it now. I mean it.”

“There is no always, Charlie. Be thankful what we had.”

Charlie watched his hands, the scars, the liver spots, the nub where he’d lost the pinky to a circle saw.

“I was never happy,” June said. “Except when I was drunk, now and then. There is times when you’re drunk or doping that you just glow.” She smiled at the memory.

Charlie made a noise. She shushed him. “Listen, sugar. It wasn’t nothing about you. It’s a gift. Some get it, some don’t. Like singing. I never could sing. Everybody sing at church, I mouth the words. Shoot. I cut loose some little kid starts crying.” She ducked her head, a thin smile, smoked and coughed and made a pass at her mouth with the knotted handkerchief. “You done all you could.”

Charlie placed the flat of his hand on top of his cap and made a funny face. “I always come up short,” he said. And grinned. Big ugly grin, lips peeling back over the grey choppers. He avoided mirrors. Homely little bow legged man, a strip of speckled hair circling his splotchy skull, petering out over his big ears. He had no use for mirrors.

June clutched his wrist. Her hand was cold. “Listen to me, Charlie. Last night, you dozed off in the chair, like you do. Snoring, your eye was twitching, and all of the sudden you smiled. I sat here looking at you thinking to myself, ‘Sister, it ain’t all bad.’”

She pushed the brown bottle at him. “Open it for me.”

He twisted the cap. “It’s no hurry.”

She waved a hand. “I hurt, Charlie. You have no idea. The mess. The smells.” She looked at her cigarette. “Leave me awhile. Go see your boy.”

Charlie tuned in the parade, a little snowy, and pulled the flaps over his ears and left her on the sofa and turned the antenna at the side of the house and sat in the truck.

So it come to this. All the years June backsliding, drunk and whoring around with any swinging dick would buy her a bottle and pay for a three-dollar room. Filthy hair, filthy clothes, she'd chewed her nails to the quick when he met her. He took her home and bathed her, bought her a pretty dress, put a shine on her. Chased her two years, you damn fool. That time he pulled her out of yet another cinder block motel, shoved her into the Studebaker, turned and cold-cocked the big pig-eyed chub chasing after them in his boxer shorts. All that time pulling her from other men's beds, he saw himself not as the cuckold, the fool, but as the suffering hero who would lift her up, bathe her, wash away the stink of other men, the foul odor of alcohol sweat. All that time sustained only by a fatal gumption, a numb and joyless conviction that he deserved her.

Dolores

He began attending meetings after Dolores left him. Plan was he'd sober up and Dolores would take him back. It was a plan. He sobered up, only Dolores had met somebody at her church, a skinny fellow name Wendell, who fitted shoes at Sears Roebuck. Charlie stood on the porch he had built onto their house, pleading with her through the latched screen door. There was a dirt dauber nest plastered above the header. When she was done with him and closed the door, Charlie pulled out his pocket knife and stood on his toes and scraped the little tunnel of mud. She'd got her fill of Charlie Glover. She married Wendell. Next time he saw them, they were calling Charlie Boy "Wendell," too, after his step-father. "We decided it was confusing to call him Charlie Boy," she said. Charlie got his back up. "But I'm his daddy!" Dolores smiled sweetly, that particular smile like an ice pick in the heart. "You are his sire, Charlie. His

daddy is Wendell.” She asked Charlie not to come around anymore. It was confusing to little Wendell to have two daddies.

She never wept. Wouldn't give him that. Prim, brave little woman, her face spotting, frozen, her tiny body frozen, as if to quell his drunken rages with a mighty stillness. She had been two years from a teacher's certificate when she ran off to Oklahoma to marry the wild man. Broke her parents' hearts. They knew. They smelled the liquor on his breath, watched his eyes fill up with want and get every time she crossed in front of him. She was pregnant. That's how he got her. Got her pregnant. Not that he'd pushed it. She couldn't keep her hands off him. She had been a virgin when they met, and then she wasn't, and she couldn't keep her hands off him. He was happy. How else does a man like Charlie Glover convince a woman like Dolores to marry him? He bought her a two-dollar ring and got drunk to celebrate the engagement. He got drunk again to celebrate the marriage. Dolores drove them home in her daddy's Hudson. When Charlie Boy was born, Charlie was drunk again, laid up with some road whore. That was Charlie Glover for you. After Dolores remarried, he didn't see much of his son. He liked to lay it off on her, but, truth be told, he had got busy. There was this new woman. He was busy playing hero, saving her sorry ass.

A great hickory tree, from which depended a rope and a tire swing, shaded the junky yard. Two old cars and a capsized bike with training wheels were parked in the yard. A few scruffy chickens scudding around the yard like dirty little clouds. As Charlie approached the house, the chickens scattered, squawking. A dog barked. A single goose crossed the sky. He hitched his pants and stood at the door like anybody's daddy but he did not knock. He lit a cigarette and smoked. A dog was barking from under the

house. As he went around back of the house a gust of wind flagged a sheet on the line and bounced some khaki pants, hanging on wire stretchers. A cloud of dust tumbled across the grassless yard.

The dog, tethered to a heavy block of wood, crawled from under the house, tugging at its rope. She yipped, wagged her tail, showed her teeth and yipped again. Make up your mind, Charlie told her. The bitch's teats were swollen, but he saw no sign of her puppies. He dropped to his hands and knees and peered under the house. He saw a couple of chickens, and, on the other side of the house, the wheels of his truck. No pups. Had Wendell dumped them in the woods to starve, to freeze, to be eaten by hogs? Or had he drowned them, buried them alive? How did he become, this sullen boy, child of my lust? No doubt I was drunk when he happened.

Charlie felt a cold nose on his ear. The dog sniffed. Bird dog. Would she point? Bring home the meat? Homely critter, skinny, hip blades poking through her splotchy hide. A splotchy, liver colored saddle covered her scrawny withers, her eyes a burglar's mask. Hello, girl. The dugs hung low, leaking. She strained against the tether, a low growl in her throat, and hunkered down as Charlie stuck out his hand. This dog had been kicked. Charlie blinked and shivered. The icy wind nipped at his jacket, finding the loose collar, the gap where a button was missing. The wind, the dust in his eyes made him dizzy. Charlie grabbed the rope and drug the block of wood and the dog to a low window and stood on the block and peeked in the house under a tilted blind.

Mavis sat on the sofa across the room with a man Charlie had never seen. Wendell sat in an easy chair, spitting his dip in a coke bottle. They were drinking beer, watching a football game. The boy, chewing his shirttail, sat on the floor with a cardboard puzzle. They looked happy. Mavis sharing a huge sack of potato chips with

the stranger slumped on the couch, her long shiny hair pleated and stacked like a turban on top of her head. Wendell was fat. He sat holding onto his belly, as if it might roll off his lap if he let go. Charlie clutched the window sill. Mavis poked her fat little hand into the sack of chips and the stranger poked his big paw into the sack and they grinned at each other, the sack moving as if they had trapped an animal in it. The boy chewed his shirttail as he worked on the puzzle. They looked happy. Were they happy?

Last time he saw the boy, two or three years ago, June had wangled a meeting at a barbecue joint. They met out front. Charlie shook his son's hand and tried to hug his grandson, who shrank from him.

Mavis said, "Watch out your hand there. He's a biter."

"So was his daddy," said Charlie. He showed his nub to the boy. "See what your daddy done? Rascal done ate my finger!"

Wendell said, "Don't be telling your lies, Pops."

"Just playing with him," Charlie said.

June said, "Let's eat. I'm hungry. Ain't anybody hungry?"

At their table, Mavis positioned the boy between her and Wendell. Charlie winked at his grandson. The boy stared straight ahead chewing on his shirttail, the frank, stupid look of an infant in his eyes. What say you to a child you hardly know, your own kin a stranger? He didn't know what to say. The men ate mostly in silence, Mavis and June chatting about Mavis's hair, which was unnaturally oily, June offering to work on it at the beauty shop. Charlie asked Wendell about his work, and Wendell picking at his coleslaw complained his boss didn't appreciate him, the US of A going to hell in a hand basket. The boy opened his sandwich and ate the meat with his fingers.

As they parted, Charlie offered to shake hands. Wendell hunched his shoulders and stuffed his fingers in his pockets, his face spotting.

Charlie said, "Let's us visit sometime. You and me, I mean."

Wendell shifted his weight heel to heel, cocked his mouth left-wise, working the dip, and spat on the ground. "Not if I see you coming, Pops." He cut a little smirk at his wife, pleased with the snappy comeback.

As June drove them home, Charlie said, "Wendell never called me Pops before."

June said, "I think he was being sarcastic."

"Boy always had a way with words," Charlie said. "Got it from his mama."

He stepped off the block and leaned over at the waist, dizzy. The dog curtsied, playful, but changed her mind and sat on her tail. Charlie stood up breathing the cold air, watching Wendell's khakis flop on the line. The back door stoop was a pile of cinder blocks. Fair to middling carpenter could throw up a little porch in a day, dress it with a trellis. Morning glories! He went into his pocket and brought out the pocket knife, leaned down and cut the rope at the dog's collar. She scampered away from him shaking her head, and made a little stumbling circle around the block of wood as if still attached to it. She was new in space, uncertain, and she shook her head as if disbelieving her freedom.

Charlie ducked into an icy gust and walked around the side of the house and returned to the truck without looking back. The dog followed. He stuck out his hand. She sniffed. Sit. Good girl. He scratched her ears. She pulled away. Curtsied, flirting, dipped her head and yipped. Nobody ever scratch your ears? Get in the truck. I'll scratch your ears. I'll call your name and you will come. She sat on her haunches looking up, tiny bulbs of milk leaking from her teats. He picked her up and toted her. She squirmed. A

sneaky pain jolted his hip as he dropped her in the truck. She sat on the seat sniffing, waiting. Had she ever done else but wait? Charlie cranked the engine and drove away without looking back.

June

He entered the kitchen through the back door and opened the Frigidaire and pulled out a bottle of milk. He could see her feet, a fuzzy house shoe, still propped up on the end of the sofa. One shoe had fallen off. Something happening in the ball game, the crowd cheered, the announcer barked excitedly. Her foot twitched. His heart sank. He retrieved a loaf of white bread and tore up a couple of slices and dumped them into a bowl, which he filled with milk. The dog was waiting at the bottom of the steps. He called her, but she was afraid to mount the steps, probably a beating offense at Wendell's. He scooped her up in his arms, the old back complaining, and brought her up the steps and dumped her in the kitchen. She lapped up the milk and bread in half a minute and sat looking up at him. Ugly mutt. So what call her? June had always named the animals.

"Let's go meet June," he said. She followed him into the living room, her nails clicking against the linoleum floor.

Her robe had shifted, exposing a bony knee. Her legs, so thin! Blossoms! He could hear the television. Something exciting. Crowd noise. Touchdown! He saw her foot twitch. His heart sank. The dog sat waiting, head cocked, bright-eyed and curious.

He turned off the television and sat on the sofa, nudging June to make a place. He felt her cold face. As he removed his fingers one eyelid popped open. Her lips were blue. From under the table in the kitchen a mouse watched them. Charlie blinked. The

mouse sat on its hind legs its prayerful paws clutching a crumb of bread. He unwound the cloth from her fingers and dampened it from the bottle and pressed it to her nostrils and pressed his hand over her mouth. He heard a little gurgle in her throat, a gasp, and he felt her shudder. He pressed harder and held. That was all.

When he let go he was sweating. The dog, at first shy of the space heater, had drawn closer to the fire, attracted by the warmth, and lay with its snout between its paws, dozed off and rolled on its side, snoring quietly, dreaming, emitting a little yelp, scrawny legs twitching. Lulu, he thought. Like in the funny papers. Give it time. Like breaking in a pair of new shoes, you had to move around in a name to make it fit right.

He found a puddle in the kitchen. Nudged the dog with his foot. She lifted her head, a sleepy expression on her face, a string of drool leaking from her black lips, attaching to the floor. He went into the bathroom into the dirty clothes hamper and came out with a rag to soak up the pee. The dog followed and watched as he returned to the bathroom and rinsed out the cloth in the toilet. He said, "You and me gonna get along you need to do your business outside." He scratched behind her ears and stroked her throat. She dropped to her haunches and loosed a wiry moan. He looked at June, far and still. "I ought to call somebody," he said. He went into the kitchen and went into the refrigerator and came out with a carton of eggs and scrambled four eggs and gave half to the dog and ate the other half out of the pan with a spoon. He sat in the green chair. He was in no hurry to make the call. He had all the time in the world.

THE END