

Electric

Paul McCue drowned in a college hazing gone amuck. The fraternity pledges, clad only in diapers, found him face down in the shallow water of the Marquette Lagoon. In their drug induced state, they watched the moonlight sear through gnarly branches. This revealed Paul as a sea monster with spindly, herbaceous arms. His long silver antennas flailed in the wind, sensing the pledges fear. By the time the police arrived, most had soiled themselves, and the whole thing was sobering.

The fraternity enlisted their Gold Coast lawyers. They referred to the investigation as ‘A Fishing Expedition’; the drowning an aberration. As sordid details came to light, Paul died over and over again, kowtowing to some dismal hierarchy. His parents handled each body blow through prayer and vocation. His sister Mary did not fare so well, brooding and bitter.

In hopes of clearing her head, she routinely walked to Orphan’s Pond, discovered by neighborhood children when the orphanage was condemned for God knows what, but everyone knew what ‘what’ was.

Mary tucked her Walkman into her pocket for the five- mile walk. She clicked in the cassette of *Boston*, ready to start her day, but most of the time music distressed her. As sidewalk stretched into forestry, she talked aloud to Paul. She begged for answers, and if not from him, she’d even settle for some ruthless God. Women jogged past her; tummies tucked in Spandex, *Physical* blaring in their earphones. Instead of hearing their bodies talk, they heard the morning decree: Mary had lost her mind. Well, desperation would eventually catch up with them too.

Mary stepped in sand to rest at the steel bench. It slumped like an old man whose muscles and mind had atrophied; eyes set on the pond in front of him, memories of youth crystal clear, the present long forgotten.

She looked into the murky water, swampy, and Paul’s fateful night emerged; him in a diaper, sucking the sorority girl’s breasts, her name chosen from a top- hat. He complied to every command, sucking a pacifier soaked in whiskey, drinking a baby bottle of Ever-clear, catching catfish with his teeth, fried then doused with opioids.

Mary hurled a boulder into the pond, and it thumped as if volcanic. She too uttered a guttural sound, disrupting birdsong. They soared to the open sky, and she jumped as if she too

could fly. “Why do you get to escape?”

She took the scenic route home. Oleander Avenue was riddled with charming storefronts of bakery and barber, boutique and jewelry. The Metra train ran parallel, delightful in juxtaposition. Mr. Bird, owner of the corner thrift store, flipped the sign to open. He greeted her at the door with the old adage ‘*the early bird gets the worm*’ and she cringed because he thought it still clever.

She browsed through vintage magazines, and remembered Paul and the neighbor boys, under the street light. They’d whispered stories of dirty magazines hidden in the thrift store shelving, and that Mr. Bird would take the magazines into the bathroom and touch himself. She laughed now, but the familiar pang of shattered innocence, deep in her gut, made her nine again.

She thumbed through a teen-age magazine of yesteryear. Fashion models with beehive hairdos displayed amber jewels adorning their ballerina hands. The featured article spoke of amber’s beauty, preserved at ninety million years old. Before original sin, it oozed as tree resin, repairing abrasions in prehistoric trees of preposterous size. Amber sustained healing qualities, but hardened in texture and spirit, when men, created solely to thrive in paradise, pillaged it instead.

Mary rummaged through a cupboard of custom jewelry, and of all things, came upon an amber gem. She decided it was fate, and Mr. Bird tapped at the old-fashioned cash register. “That’s sure a pretty stone. I’ll give you ten-percent off to boot. Such a shame, your brother. I hope he’s laid to rest soon, for your parent’s sake.”

Mary, not wanting to touch his hands, mumbled ‘keep the change’. She rushed to the door, and the shopkeeper bells chimed with the whistle of the incoming train. White collared dads leaned at the depot; shoes shiny from a spit and a polish, thick striped neckties dangling in the wind like the flag high at the post; newspaper tucked under their armpits, purchased for a dime at the paperstand.

The 8:17 pulled in on an angle and off they went toward the Chicago Loop. They flipped to the sports section, anxious to read about Mike Ditka’s latest temper tantrum, while their little

ones, at the home-front, recoiled at kisses. “Mom! Your lipstick!” And teen-agers wrestled for popped-up Eggos, and it was a crap- shoot as to which kid would screw up someday, in colossal fashion, derailing parental plans already set in motion.

Mary tucked the amber gem under her pillow at nightfall, because that’s when everything ached.

In the spring of 1983, months prior to Paul’s fateful night, white -collar dads changed into sweatshirts, and weekends were reserved for opening their summer cottages.

Mr. Moore resided with his wife and their seven boys in the Tudor, two houses down from the McCue’s. He packed up his station wagon, the youngest in tow. His older boys tossed a Nerf ball at the curb, and those detained objected. “Why do they get to stay?”

Mrs. Moore scooted laboriously into the front seat, moaning and groaning, for her backside was not what it used to be. “I thought you kids loved Wisconsin?”

Whining ensued. “We don’t want to flip the mattresses!” “There’s cockroaches in the bathroom.” “The septic tank is stinky like poo!”

Mr. Moore seethed, shimmying fishing poles in through the rear. “Ingrates! You know when I was a young buck, I trudged ten miles to school in a wind breaker with a broken zipper and snow up to my eyeballs. Do you think I had a summer home? Let alone a God-damn boat?”

Children covered their ears, and they screamed as if tortured. “Please, not again!”

The Nerf ball bounced off the windshield, and Mrs. Moore rolled down her window. “Boys, grandma’s phone number is under the Blackhawk’s magnet on the fridge. And no more than two friends in the house at a time. If you make frozen pizzas, don’t put them in the oven with the cardboard.”

Nick, the eldest, feigned interest in a Rubik’s Cube. “We’ll hold down the fort.”

Mr. Moore nodded. “Yes, Nicholas, get on that science project. I see a gold ribbon on the horizon!”

Mrs. Moore secured the kerchief over her fresh hairdo, stiff as a bird’s nest, courtesy of Aqua Net. She opened Jennifer Blake in paper back. “And don’t burn the house down!” Mr.

Moore tuned the radio to 720, and Harry Caray bellowed. “Jody Davis, deep left field! Holy Cow! It could be, it might be, it is! A home- run!”

The young ones climbed to the way-back seat. They flashed obscene gestures out the back window, and the older boys bowed. “We’ve taught you flunkies well.”

After the designated time had expired on the odds of Mrs. Moore barreling through the front door - *‘I can’t believe I forgot my clip-ons for the Friday night fish fry’*-the rotary phone was dialed, and Nick gave Paul the ‘all clear’.

Friends came in droves. They rolled pony kegs down the basement stairs, chaperoned by uncles, revered for college hoodies and fake I’D’s. “Quit bouncing them, you dufuses! Do you want foam?”

“Bite me.”

“We’ll return them, I swear!”

“Why is there always a threat involved?”

The Outsiders movie was the craze. Paul, with square jaw and broad shoulders, was likened to Patrick Swayze. “Aw-shucks,” he said, flexing his arm muscles.

Mary angled her red solo cup under the keg spout. She declared the novel superior to the movie, after all, the other hunks eclipsed poor Pony Boy. Paul snapped his fingers. “See? Another reason not to read novels. Why second guess a Hollywood blockbuster?”

Nick beckoned Mary and friends to the coffee table. “Bring your quarters, and your beer.”

“*Do it for Johnny!*” Paul exclaimed. *Kerplunk.*

Nick beamed. “Drink, my Cherry girls,” to which Mary replied, “Oh! What I would give to look like Diane Lane.”

Paul lit a Kool, and his eyes narrowed. “You kind of have her cheekbones.”

The Moore boys concurred. “Legit!” “Yah Betty.”

Her mood ring changed to indigo, and she touched her face. “Really?”

In short order, motor skills were compromised. Nick’s science project, with

the following objective: 'to construct river models to discover how different river shapes change the water flow', rested in the aluminum pan at the basement utility sink, where offenses, best not mentioned, caused the river to run like a ribbon of gold, and it drenched the lab notebook at its side. Upon discovery, Nick demanded the names of the perpetrators, only to endure a chant that caught on like wild fire: "Cry me a river!" By the end of the night, Mary rejected his drunken advances, so, he tipped the empty keg, and cried a river.

After midnight, Paul and Mary meandered through back alleys, a short cut to home. Mary tumbled into the neighbor's garbage cans, fell victim to the quarter's game, and barfed in weeds, fresh for pulling.

She walked away from the mess. "I told you, I'm no Diane Lane."

"Did you know her mom was a Playboy centerfold?"

"Really?"

He nodded. "I found her in one of the old Playboys at the thrift store."

"I hope Mr. Bird didn't touch it first!"

Their father, Michael McCue, was the neighborhood chiropractor. He swore to uphold the Hippocratic Oath, and coveted it as much as his God. He considered health insurance and pharmaceutical companies corrupt; fanciful chiropractic machines exploitative. His fees were nominal. He accepted the barter system, and practiced manual therapy.

He sat in his Lazy Boy, a can of Old Style in hand. The newspaper was read from front to back, the crossword puzzle penciled in, everything solved. He glanced up from *Police Woman* to late-night shenanigans, and grabbed his asthma inhaler for a swig, but really it was a sigh of relief. The front door slammed, and the chimes of the grandfather clock reverberated.

Paul plopped a sack of White Castle cheeseburgers on the TV tray, which housed an empty food container. "I see you snarfed down an epic Hungry Man."

Dr. McCue nodded. "Salisbury steak, but sliders are a welcome dessert." He pointed to the television. "And Pepper Anderson is the cherry on top."

"What is it with men?" Mary mused, and made a b-line to her bedroom.

Dr. McCue bit into a Whitey-one-bite, washing it down with the Old Style.

“Paul, Mr. Davie gave me bleacher tickets to the White Sox game Sunday. His sciatica’s improving.”

Paul clapped. “The Tigers! Great series.”

“Yes, but Tom Skilling’s calling for cold winds off the lake.”

“We’ll dress in layers. I’ll wear my Fisk jersey over my coat.”

Dr. McCue reached into the sack for another burger. “Mary looked peaked.”

Paul shrugged. “She always regrets the White Castles.” He stole a burger, handed off the pickles, and changed the subject. “Did you use heat therapy for Mr. Davie?”

Dr. McCue chewed on pickles. “And table adjustments.”

Paul devoured the burger. “So, is he on the road to recovery?”

“He doesn’t do his exercises, so it’ll reboot.”

“Self -sabotage.”

Dr. McCue opened a ketchup packet for the next burger. “It’s very frustrating, and when you follow in my foot-steps you’ll have to deal ___”

Paul took a napkin. “This conversation is for another day, dad.”

“With your bed-side manner ___”

“I’m an artist.”

“That’s a hobby.”

Paul tossed the napkin in the small garbage can. “Three points!”

Dr. McCue placed the bun back atop the burger, and lit a cigarette. “Basketball, also, a fun hobby.”

Paul massaged his father’s shoulders. “Dad, I have my eyes on the horizon of water colors, okay?”

Dr. McCue sighed. “And what’s there?”

“Gold.”

Dr. McCue, whose parents were from the homeland, easily feigned an Irish brogue.

“The gold at the end of the rainbow is a mere fantasy, me boy.”

“It hasn’t been disproved.”

Dr. McCue exhaled smoke. “Put a bucket, two aspirin, and a glass of water on Mary’s bedstand. Keg beer’s a bitch.”

Paul grinned. “Some would say the same about Old Style.”

Paul drowned in early October, on Mary’s nineteenth birthday.

Their mother, Mrs. Therese McCue, sat at the kitchen stool parked under the wall phone, as the officer relayed what didn’t register.

“Well, is he okay?” she asked.

Silence.

“Mrs. McCue, your son drowned. He’s not okay.”

“Ponyboy drowned in the fountain at the park. He lived to write all about it, so__”

“I wish this was fiction.” The officer looked at his muddied shoes. They had been so shiny that morning.

Mrs. McCue pointed to the cake atop the oven. “I made their favorite, homemade buttercream frosting.”

The phone rang, the sound elongated and strange. She reached for the receiver and put it to her ear. “Hello.”

Heavy static consumed the line, and a faraway voice said *mama*.

Mrs. McCue rubbed her forehead. “Paul?”

The officer coughed. “Mrs. McCue, sometimes wires get crossed out there.”

A current rushed through her, electric. “Exactly! Don’t you believe in God?”

“We regretfully ask you and Dr. McCue,” and he motioned to the latter, “to come down to identify__”

Dr. McCue stood affixed at the door-frame, the one Paul scaled on a regular basis. He’d spit into his hands and off he’d go. “Get a load of this.”

The cuckoo bird emerged from the wall clock; its coo flat, and it wasn’t on the hour, but at 2:44 a.m., the time of Mary’s birth. She pitter-pattered now from the

bedroom, and fell at her mother's knees, screaming like a newborn thrust into the world, and her dad ran his hands up and down the door-frame, in search of fingerprints.

The birthday cake went stale for days at the stovetop, and Mrs. McCue told Mary the long-kept secret of the gypsy:

In the hippy days, at a flea market of junk, a gypsy abandoned her crystal ball to lean into the buggy where Paul sucked his thumb. She pulled his hand to read his palm, and he cooed, for he was a congenial baby.

Her eyes widened, and she wrapped her musty poncho around her. Mrs. McCue denounced such theatrics, and pushed the buggy toward a stand of fake turquoise. The gypsy clomped in Clogs behind her. "Your baby's lifeline wanes."

Mrs. McCue, big with child, set the break of the buggy. "And you, young lady, are soulless!"

"I am a child of Jesus."

Mrs. McCue, hormonal, slapped her across the face. "All blasphemy!"

"I am a prophet." The gypsy flailed her fists. "You're lucky you're pregnant! For more reasons than one."

"You're a junkie. I see it in your eyes." Mrs. McCue's smock top puffed up, a fetal kick within, and the gypsy, red-faced, opened her hands to God. "The boy will be your daughter's best friend, through all veils."

Mrs. McCue held her stomach. "Daughter?"

In the aftermath of Paul's death, there was the autopsy and the investigation and the funeral arrangements. The doctor suggested tranquilizers for Mary and Mrs. McCue, but the latter objected. "Doctor Patel, I don't aspire to be a pill-popper. Need I remind you I'm a woman of prayer?"

He continued writing. "There's, now is not the time to champion hyperbole, nor smugness."

Mary held out her hand. “How many can I take at once, Doc?”

He looked up from the clipboard. “Are you giving us an astute example of hyperbole?”

“You’re the doctor. What do you think?”

When she slept deep, Dr. McCue kept vigil over her, and he wiped her mouth of drool. His pipe exhaled smoke the scent of cedar wood. Mary watched Paul climb a Giant Sequoias that reached beyond the sky. The bark oozed with liquid bronze, so she slipped and fell, and her father frowned when she jerked with spasms.

He strained his ears to hear the sport’s update from the Zenith on the other side of the wall: The Baltimore Orioles eliminated the Chicago White Sox to advance to the World Series, Carlton Fisk hitting .176 postseason; albeit bleak, he’d go on to win the Cy young, because in baseball, there’s always another day.

Dr. McCue considered the pill bottle, even toyed with the lid. He puffed on the inhaler in search of breath, and if he didn’t find it that was okay too, but he reached for Mary’s wrist and took her pulse. It was fast, as if she ran off somewhere.

At the conclusion of Paul’s graveside ceremony, the crowd hung their heads. Touched, Dr. McCue murmured a heartfelt invitation to the luncheon at the bungalow. They dispersed and he’d lingered at the gravesite. The cemetery workers utilized a loud contraption to lower the coffin. Jason Crow, the funeral director, approached. He offered to give the family a lift.

Dr. McCue tipped his tweed cap. “That’s very kind, my fine young sir.” He watched as Jason made his way toward the limo, and he turned to Mary’s footsteps behind him. She reached for his arm. “And how did I earn this privilege?” he asked.

“My toes are numb from these stupid heels.” But that was not the reason.

A strong wind blew her long hair asunder. Birds flew from trees, but a cardinal stood steadfast on the lowest branch of a Cypress tree. “The cardinal, dad. What a cliché’.”

“Thing about clichés, they’re usually spot on.”

Mary watched the Moore family pile into their station wagon, and it was quite the ceremony. Mrs. Moore waddled, embarking on her last trimester of pregnancy. “Why didn’t you have more kids, like them?”

“You know, your mother, back in the day, was considered spinster status by the time we met.” He paused; his wife, gray haired for many years now, did not have line or wrinkle upon her face, or if she did, he was blind to them. “After you and Paul, well, a few early miscarriages and then, well, things just don’t always work out as planned.”

Mary tsk-ed. “You tell me this now?”

“You asked.”

Mary smiled vaguely. “Maybe Mrs. Moore is still vying for a girl.”

Dr. McCue nodded. “I wouldn’t blame her in the least.”

Mary glanced at the gravesite. “That monstrosity is like a pully, lowering a bucket into a well.”

He pulled them forward. “You need not look back, literally or otherwise.”

“Jack and Jill went up the hill. No more Jack, dad.”

“That doesn’t mean you tumble after him.”

“Is that a pact?”

Mrs. McCue motioned from the opened limo door, and Jason Crow held for her a Tupperware of homemade scones. “Stop dilly-dallying,” she said. “We, we have to go home without him.”

And the cardinal took flight.

Jason Crow turned the ignition key of the limousine. His hair was an iridescent black and layered like crow feathers. He adjusted the rear-view mirror and watched Mary apply rollerball lip gloss, and the flavor was bubblegum, and he longed to kiss her to remind him of life’s salacious appetite, but he compared her to the deceased instead: the square jaw, thick curly hair, and the hazel eyes which he closed with his own fingertips seemed open now, resenting every minute, for they had a glimpse of after.

Jason abhorred the family business. He had an elaborate plan to study abroad, avoiding the matter, but his dad, diagnosed with an aggressive disease, launched a crash course in embalming and a fury of lawyers to draw up papers that stipulated his favorite son-yes, the empathic one-would be sole benefactor of Crow's Funeral Home.

Mrs. McCue whispered prayers, the rosary at her fingertips, and Mary and she sat hip to hip. They faced Dr. McCue like a train ride, and the Chicago street, riddled with pot holes, made it seem so. "For Christ's sake, where do our taxes go?" He reached down for the unfiltered Camel that had bounced from his lips. "Sleezy politicians, that's where."

Mary unbuttoned her coat, buttons shaped like acorns. "Dad, why did you give the green light for strangers to invade our house? This is all so__ drawn out. The burial should've been private."

Dr. McCue flicked his monogrammed lighter. "What about your mutual friends?"

She sighed. "They're long gone."

He took a drag from the cigarette, and exhaled. "Or are you?"

She shrugged. "What came first, the chicken or the egg?"

"I'd bet on you, even though you're a good egg."

She nodded. "Maybe."

He picked at loose tobacco on his tongue. "Paul knew the others at the ceremony. We must be hospitable."

"Why?"

"Common decency."

She leaned her head on the seat of purple velvet. "Aren't you tired?"

"That's beside the point."

"And, by the way, I knew everyone that mattered."

Dr. McCue poured bourbon from the decanter into a glass, there for the taking.

"Obviously not, or maybe he'd still be alive. You two always babysat each other."

She straightened. "You're the one that preached the prestigious university route, dad. He was all set to go to Columbia, but instead became entangled with pompous frat boys, evil to the

core, and they are going to be in the house when Paul's not!"

He exhaled smoke. "Blanket statements are a sign of ignorance."

"Not in this fucked- up scenario."

Mrs. McCue gasped, and the rosary jiggled.

Dr. McCue tossed a cigarette ash into the silver ashtray in the armrest. "Please don't curse, Mary. It's unladylike."

"Do as I say, not as I do."

"I'm not a lady."

Mrs. McCue piped in. "And Mary, everyone saw you smoking a cigarette at the bench by the Sycamore tree. Very tacky."

"Death warrants tobacco," Mary pointed at the decanter, "and alcohol. May I, dad?"

"No." He fiddled with his wedding ring. He wasn't the jewelry type, and the bloat from booze added to his misery. "Paul was smarter than me." His jaw pulsed. "Such a waste."

Mary sniffled. "You were the Salutatorian, dad!"

"It was easier, then."

"That's bullshit," she whispered, and her mom pinched her.

"Ow!"

He shook his head. "I never attained a lake house. He would have."

"We never were," Mary swallowed, "water people."

"The sky was the limit for him."

"And now you're left with me, the disappointment."

He smashed the cigarette butt in the ashtray. "You don't apply yourself."

Mary yawned. "Surreal blur! Gotta love tranqs."

"Brace yourself. Only one left."

"How do you know?"

Mrs. McCue crossed herself with the rosary. "It's a blur no matter what. I never touched those crazy pills. They change your brain, Mary."

"Where are they?" Father and daughter asked in sync, and Mary, in a recent life,

would've laughed and said 'make a wish', but the wish was futile.

Mrs. McCue unsnapped her clutch purse to tuck in her rosary and take out a Kleenex. "Michael, you're holistic." Her lips quivered, and Mary turned to the window.

"I was." He slugged down more bourbon and coughed at the sting and phlegm, and his wife dabbed her tears with the Kleenex. "Please Michael, just stick to your vitamins. And you need to sleep, you never sleep. I don't even hear you snoring anymore, and then I can't sleep."

"Every time I try, I dream I can't find my inhaler." He coughed. "If I fall asleep, I stop breathing."

"That's your imagination getting the best of you."

"The best of me is gone."

Mary hmphed. "What am I, chopped liver?"

She watched his Adam's apple quiver, and his neck had a rash from emotion and razor.

Dr. McCue shut his eyes. "I would've died, so he could live."

"That's not your place." Mrs. McCue retrieved a small tube of hand lotion from her purse. She reached for her husband's hand, and with a dollop, the wedding ring made its way off his finger.

He relaxed. "Let's rest our eyes." In short order, they snored.

Mary rolled her fingertips over her mother's rosary beads, *'for where there are two or three gathered together unto My name...'*

She caught Jason's gaze reflected in the rear-view mirror. "Taking it all in, Grim Reaper?"

"You're not the only one who'd rather be elsewhere, take my word for it."

Mary leaned forward to whisper. "Did you know Paul died on my birthday? How about that for a big 'fuck you'?"

"It's biblical."

She scoffed. "Oh please, Young Mr. Crow. What a crock of shit."

He adjusted the rearview mirror. "You don't see what I see."

At the bungalow, women, known in neighborhood circles as ‘The Mrs. Kravitz Crew’, ate finger food and chain-smoked Virginia Slims 100’s, speculating how long the McCue’s would need casseroles.

Ray Goodman of Pratt Street, his wife conspicuously absent, winked at his new neighbor, Candie Taylor, her tongue exploiting an olive on a toothpick. The women played with their collars: *that one* will *not* be the recipient of the welcome wagon. “A plunging neckline at a funeral.”

“Just shocking.”

“Tart.”

“Goodman, entrapped in her web.”

“Rumor has it, Phyllis Goodman is frigid.”

Silence.

“Well, she is in the throes of menopause. It ruins so many pleasures.”

“That’s when the bastards get young ones.”

The male counterparts huddled together. They feigned no appetite, for there were slim pickings, but they drank liberal rounds of stiff drinks. As liquor went to their heads, gossip spewed from their mouths, so they distanced themselves from Paul’s kin:

Mr. Goodman spoke. “He was in shallow water, drowned at the shoreline of the Marshall Lagoon, you know, where it slopes.”

“Just had to lift up his head,” Mr. Moore said, and he looked at Mr. Harris, a paramedic, for confirmation.

Mr. Harris nodded. “He passed out in the cat-tails.”

“Poor kid.”

They gulped their drinks.

Mr. Wild, who’d recently retired early from the post office, broke the silence. “You know, you can catch largemouth bass there.”

Mr. Goodman gulped his Highball. “We played ice hockey on it, when we were little

tikes.”

Mr. Harris lit a cigar. “Frat boys probably figured lagoon was isolated spot.”

Mr. Wild agreed. “Yah, it wasn’t getting the foot traffic like back in the day. No time for leisure.”

“Just you.”

Heads nodded in agreement: some bald, some receding, some with a comb over.

Mr. Wild handed Mr. Harris an ash tray from the side table. “I heard a frater ordered Paul to do his age in whisky shots.”

Mr. Harris nodded. “Twenty in ten minutes.”

Mr. Goodman glanced back at the McCue folk, and lowered his voice. “Had to wear a diaper, and suck a pacifier too.”

“I heard a baby bottle.”

“Nope, a sorority pledge’s titty.”

“Oh, those college days.”

“If I had a time machine.”

“Breasts so perky.”

They glanced at Candie, and Mr. Moore cleared his throat. “Yah, I guess the sorority girls were pledging too, so a mixer of sorts. Names were picked out of a top-hat for coupling. What a circus.”

Mr. Goodman leaned in. “I bet a lot of tents.”

They chuckled, and Mr. Wild changed the subject. “Whatever happened to ‘Just Say No’?” He waved at his kids who smiled, silly-faced, sipping Sprite and vodka. “My kids know all about Nancy Reagan and her message.”

Mr. Moore, slick in the ways of wayward teens, raised an eyebrow. “They can know of her, that doesn’t mean squat.”

Mr. Goodman refilled his glass with gin. “Paul was pledging, was at the frat’s beck and call.”

“So, a follower?” Mr. Wild asked.

“Are you really throwing the first stone?”

“Who would stand for that humiliation?”

Mr. Harris crushed the butt of the cigar in the shell-shaped ashtray. “Many. The alumni have connections to high places.”

As if all working parts of a machine, the huddle turned to the frat boys, tight-lipped in the sacred oath of silence.

Mr. Wild talked out the side of his mouth. “They sang like canaries.”

The frat boys, of high intelligence, stood perplexed at the window seat, for various angiosperms were all abloom, impossible for fall.

Mr. Wild watched Dr. McCue open the dining room window. “Hey, do you guys think Michael is a fisherman? Might be good for him, fresh breeze, relaxation, meditation.”

Mr. Harris loosened his tie, hot from the liquor. “I really don’t think thinking he’s in the frame of mind to meditate.”

Mr. Moore rolled his eyes. “And some of us have to work for a living, including him.”

Mary wandered with her head in *Go Ask Alice*, and friends waved and whispered and she misinterpreted everything, including the Moore boys feeble attempt at humor. They narrowed their eyes, perplexed. Nick frowned. “Paul was always a smart ass. I thought we could make her laugh. I thought in her pain she’d...need me.” He snuck whiskey, dejected.

Mary bumped into a frat boy sipping red wine. It splashed onto his pink polo shirt, and he grimaced as if blood. “Jesus! Watch where you’re going.”

“Did you watch where Paul was going?” She looked at all the fraternity members.

The boy held out his hand. “Tom Long.”

She ignored the gesture.

He clamped his hands behind his back. “I see a strong family resemblance. I’d like to offer our sincere condolences as President of Alpha__”

“Oh, the grand poo-bah. Did you give him the booze and the drugs?”

He made a gesture to his frat brothers, and they stared at their penny loafers. “We can’t disclose anything. I’m sure you understand.”

She pushed him, and he stumbled into a flowering plant. “But you can kill people?”

He quickly composed himself. “The survival of the fittest.” His fraternity brothers shifted uncomfortably, and one boy spoke. “He doesn’t mean that.”

Tom scowled. “Don’t speak for me, please.”

Mary fiddled with the cowlneck of her dress. “Paul is the fittest. His asthma acts up this time of year, and he has allergies to some liquors, but why would you losers care about that?”

“You talk about him in the present tense.”

“He’s all around here.”

Tom sipped from his glass, buying time for a snappy come-back, but he stared at the angiosperms instead.

A member of ‘The Mrs. Kravitz Crew’ invaded his personal space, scrubbing the wine stain.

His nose flared. “The wine was vinegary anyway.”

“And bitter,” she said. “My sixteen -year- old grandson has high aspirations, and he’s applied for the Smithsonian Summer Internship. William! Someone of upmost importance wants to meet you!”

“William!” Mary mimicked. “Don’t sell your soul like these assholes.” The room quieted, and she locked eyes with her dad across the room where his kin swayed by the Grandfather clock, flasks tucked in their suit pockets. His sleeves were rolled up, forearms muscular from his vocation. He blew cigarette smoke through his nose, but it was his eyes that were ablaze.

She ran past Mrs. McCue, at the piano playing *Moon River*. Mary’s eyes stung with hot tears. “Mom! I hate that song!” She scurried to the kitchen, grabbed the skeleton key off the hook, unlocked the attic door, and stomped up the creaky stairway into Paul’s bedroom.

The window was at half mast, stale air set free from wall shelves filled with Shakespearian books that now were yellow and coarse, like sand, but in the hey-day were crisp and new. Dr. McCue quoted them when courting his beloved. *If music be the food of love, play on.*

The antique typewriter bided time as a bookend for ornate frames leaning, pictures of the ages preserved. Mary loved the scent of it all, because it was their history, and Paul had loved it too. His senior year of high school Dr. McCue gave him the nod to move upstairs,] inserting a warning, “You’ll last a week up there with that asthma.”

“I’m going to paint and redecorate. I’ll clean it all up. I promise.”

“You can’t clean dankness.”

Mary stared at the wall. Paul chose to paint it halcyon green. He told her a halcyon was a mythical bird, whose nest floated on the seas, calming wind and tide.

Mary opened the chest of drawers, and searched under Paul’s tube socks for the pack of Kool’s. She found the stick matches in their hiding spot; under the lid of the copper teapot. She blew cigarette smoke through the window screen, its wires torn and pointy, and the head rush was staggering.

Across the street, in the playground of St. Jude’s elementary school, girls in plaid skirts raced toward four-square, and boys in navy vests played Horse. The bell tower housed a cross where storm clouds formed like rapid fire.

At that age, Mary sat alone at the school sandbox with Nancy Drew books, and Paul always stomped over. “Did Nancy find the hidden staircase yet?”

“She’s on the roof at a secret door.”

“Did she see the ghosts?”

Mary glanced above the pages. “Why don’t you read it to find out?”

“I can’t read.”

“Very funny.”

“You tell it better.”

“Don’t insult the ghostwriters.” Mary returned to her book.

Paul sipped from the water fountain, and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. “I have H O in Horse. Fill me in later.”

She looked up. “Huh?”

But he had gone.

She touched the amber gem in the pocket of her dress; somehow a comfort, smooth and warm.

Mary's favorite teacher, Sister Gemma, appeared onto the playground, her headdress framing her face, forever young, like a saint incorrupt. She looked up as if she knew lightning would strike, then turned toward the bungalow and waved. Mary ducked.

She doused the cigarette in the ashtray where a butt of Paul's remained, proprietor of the ghost print of his mouth curved in that shit-eating grin. Lightning flashed, thunder rumbled, and the Farrah Fawcett poster curled from the wall.

The school bell rang, and the children merged into a single-file line and disappeared brick by brick through the gymnasium door.

A red leaf floated down from the bungalow gutter. It clung at the window screen, as if a frantic hand. Mary reached for it and pricked her finger on the pointy wire, drawing blood, and it pulsed like heartbeats.

Dr. McCue set his Manhattan on the kitchen counter, ate the maraschino cherry, and tended to Mary's wound with peroxide and a band-aid.

Mary walked past huddles disbanding. She skipped down the porch stairs, crossed the potholed street, and walked toward Sister Gemma now sitting at the bench by the sandbox.

Sister Gemma opened a black umbrella, and she patted the bench for Mary to join her.

Mary curtsied. "Don't mind if I do."

Sister Gemma laughed. "Very good, then."

Mary sat with a sigh. "I wish this umbrella was propped in the sand on some exotic beach far away."

Sister Gemma tapped Mary's knee lovingly. "Me too."

"But you can't even wear a bathing suit."

"The secret to youthful skin."

Mary paused. "Everyone is gossiping, Sister."

"Not everyone."

Mary rested her head on Sister Gemma's shoulder, and closed her eyes. "Seems so."

"People just don't know what to say."

"They're judging."

She held Mary's hand. "It's an oddity when the young die, so people act oddly."

Mary rubbed her eyes. "They're all so superior."

"But the afflicted are kings."

"Then I'm royalty." Mary put her hand in her dress pocket. The amber gem fell out and sunk into the sand. Sister Gemma plucked it up. "Did you know that electron is the Greek word for amber?"

Thunder rumbled, and lightning crackled. Sister Gemma handed Mary the gem, hot in her hand. Mary's hair stood up on the back of her neck. "Paul's here."

Sister Gemma nodded. "Our bodies, fragile, hold souls for a short time, and then we're electric currents, a continuum from heaven to earth. He is home in the place God prepared for him."

"Paul's my home." Tears streamed down Mary's face. "I feel of orphan quality."

"He is with you always, right beyond the veil."

Mary's eyes widened. "Where did you hear that?"

Sister Gemma put her hand to her heart. "Right here."

The wind calmed. The ghost soul painted watercolors through dark clouds, and the sun filtered through leaves, crackling veins exposed. Mary pointed. "They look like floating hands."

Sister Gemma closed the umbrella, and opened the Bible to revelations. Blood had soaked through Mary's band-aid, and the story has no end.

