

Becoming

“Grow up.” Hank picked up his towel.

Dougie turned away, knelt in the marshy grass.

“Come on.” Hank looked down. “Get up.”

Dougie tensed his scrawny shoulders. He cupped his hands over a grasshopper, pried off one wing, added it to his pile.

“I’m counting to three.”

Dougie covered his ears. It was mosquito swatting hot. They were at the bridge end of the pond. Dougie was afraid of the water. Dad had told Hank not to leave him.

Overhead a bluejay squawked. Hank toweled off. “One.”

Dougie hunted another grasshopper. Hank slipped his shirt on, laced his sneakers up. Dougie heard their neighbor CC slashing up the path, thought Hank would stay.

“Two.” Hank snapped his towel, wrapped it around his waist. “Whine to dad all you want. I’m splitting on three.”

A yellow stalk of grass bobbed from CC’s mouth. Her wild, reddish hair was scrunched up in a coil, an orange tube top circled her chest, her pointy, sun peeled shoulders stuck out.

“Three.”

Dougie wavered.

Hank said, “If you drown, more dessert for me.” He split.

Single file behind CC came the Trent twins. All three of them in cut offs. The twins stripped off their shirts, climbed the bridge railing, dove in. Their muddy blond heads popped up. They shook spraying diamond droplets. CC stepped out of her shorts, folded them on the bridge, spread her towel out on the railing. She freed her hair, sprang, tucked her knees to her chest, hit the water in a cannon ball.

Dougie skipped in place. The water drops prickled. He watched the eighth graders form teams, two against one. He picked at a scab on his knee. Travis shot water from between his hands. Toby dunked him. CC pushed Toby under. She shrieked. Her orange, tube top was up around her neck. Her pale, lemon breasts with dark buttons poked out. She swam at Travis raked him with her nails. Toby laughed, back peddled, kicked up a froth. Pink stripes ran across Travis’ shoulder.

CC faced Dougie, adjusted her top, “Where’s your brother?”

Dougie shrugged.

Travis said, "He don't talk to strangers."

"And CC's real strange to him." Toby said

"What you doing Dougie?" CC said, "Collecting bait."

Dougie nodded. Her voice made him feel included.

"See my shorts on the bridge. Get my gummy bag will you?" CC pointed. "Toss 'em here. Can you?"

"Yeh, you do it Dougie. She'll give you one." Toby spluttered, sank below the dark surface. Ripples spread above where his head had been. Dougie felt a chill in his small parts. He'd never been on the bridge. It wasn't forbidden so much as never thought of.

"He ain't gonna do it." Travis' voice sounded like Dougie's dad. What was said cemented the future.

Doug imagined CC's shorts and reaching into a pocket. He put one bare foot in front of the other. The planks were hotter than the grass. He curled his toes. His shadow touched the worn denim. A dragon fly hovered over them. He stooped, reached into the warm pocket. From either side his arms were seized. He yelped.

Toby sneered, "Lookie here we caught us a grasshopper. What should we do with him CC?"

Travis said, "Tear his scrawny arm off. Serve him right."

"Not till he tosses me my bag." CC's voice rose from the water.

Travis snatched the bag, tossed it to CC.

Dougie felt himself lifted up and over the railing. His legs kicked. He didn't want to cry. He wanted to say he couldn't swim, had never learned. His throat closed. He pissed himself, felt the hot wooden planks again. He hopped from foot to foot.

"Ooohee he got wet without swimming." Travis laughed.

Dougie felt hands tugging his shorts down.

"Stop it you idiots." CC said. "Grow up."

The twins lifted him by his arms dropped him back on the grass next to his tumbling grasshoppers.



Hank wrote to Doug from college. Frosh year was a blast. He'd choose between two frats. Stacy came bowling with them.

Doug finished the Horatio Hornblower series. He dreamt of the young boatswain who saved the

crew. He longed for such courage. His Dad suggested O'Brian's *Captain and Commander*.

CC learned from a neighbor how to make sour dough bread. She got good at it. She dated a senior, went to the prom, made out on the couch, tried to distract him by talking about Hank.

Travis' voice changed. Toby was the first to shave. It surprised him. His cheeks looked funny in the mirror. He snuck his dad's razor, scraped, saw a sprinkle of dark hair in the sink. In the mirror he saw the back of Travis' head. He shivered. What would it be like? What would he be like? He'd never thought of not having a twin. He did not think of it now or wish Travis not to be. It was just seeing himself from the back in the mirror. He placed the razor where he'd found it, lowered the lid, sat on the toilet. A tangle of dirty socks lay in the corner. He'd never had a thought he'd not shared with Travis. What took words for others passed between them like an electric current. He wondered if Travis had sent him this new thought. It could not be worded. Later he knew the feeling as that time and CC.



After school, four days a week, the twins worked under the flickering, fluorescent lights in the unheated back of Wagner's store, stocking shelves, doing odd jobs. They got a ten percent discount. They skimmed school supplies, took day old sandwiches for lunch, sometimes dinner, took turns sneaking a smoke on the loading dock, flipped the butts into the crusted snow, watched the tiny craters blacken. They shared a Toyota pickup, spent all their time keeping it running and scheming to replace it with a Ford.

End of CC's first day working the register Travis poked Toby, "Watch this." They got on her line. With the toe of his boot Travis scuffed at the worn linoleum covering the wide planks. He put a bag of chips down and a torn five. "And don't forget my ten percent."

CC smiled up at them. The cash drawer chinged open. She put the five in its slot, handed Travis his change, slid her eyes over them each in turn, "See you guys tomorrow."

Outside Travis broke the bag open, "See that?"

Toby followed the back of his own head. "See what?" Not seeing was recent and unsettling. He didn't know if it was diminishing or freeing.

Travis tipped chips in his mouth, spoke through the crunch, "You're as dumb as she is." He shook the bag. "And you ain't even book smart."

Toby snatched the bag. "What?"

"She stuffed the bill in the drawer is all. She's supposed to lie it crosswise on top until after she

makes change. A second grader would know that.”

Toby handed the empty bag back, “Guess you'll have to learn her.”

At work CC wore a Wagner bib apron, kept her hair pinned up, changed her nail color every other day, when Doug bagged for her she chattered. She knew he feared the twins and had a crush on her. She warned him that Mrs. Beverly gave surprise quizzes on Tuesdays. She said, “Mrs. B thinks Hester deserved her scarlet A.” She looked right at him. “You know what Hester was doing in the forest with Reverend Dimmesdale?”

All he remembered was Dimmesdale's courage. He'd tried scratching CC high on his arm where it wouldn't show. Quit when he drew blood. He looked away, shrugged.

“That's ok.” She grinned, “I had to explain it to T and T, too.”

Miss Cooper wheeled her cart up. Doug knew if Miss Cooper wasn't there, CC would get around to asking after Hank and knew not to mention Stacy. He saw Travis in the stock area poke Toby, turn around, shuck off his jacket, reach into a carton of new flannel shirts, shake one out, button it on, slide his jacket back over. Doug flushed hot. He felt it was like a test. He knew he should say something, tell someone. He looked at CC. The tiny silver cross nestled on her neck gleamed. He felt suspended in air.

“Wake up.” CC said, “Miss Cooper wants the eggs separate.”

Doug fumbled with the carton.

CC caught them, shot him a look.

He needed to say something. His throat froze. He heard Miss Cooper ask if CC was a senior now. He looked back saw Travis grin, slash a long sausage shape from a new carton. Toby held it up, pointed at Doug, sliced it in half, gave the box cutter back to Travis.

Doug's ears felt hot. CC was talking to him. He shook his head.

“If you want to keep bagging you gotta stay awake. Go help Miss Cooper to her car.”

“No. No dear.” Miss Cooper's voice like old slippers on a rug. “I'm not quite that far gone yet.” She smiled at CC. “But thank you.”

“Well, watch your step. Doug here was supposed to sand.”

He blurted “I did.” Wondered why he felt such need to defend himself. He felt the twins eyes crawling on the back of his neck.

Travis tugged his jacket sleeves down. Toby prodded him. “What the fuck you doing?”

“Wouldn't you just like to be hanging out up front with CC.”

“Yeh, in your dreams. You don't own her ass.”

“Only wish I did. I'd settle for the half Hank don't use, plenty to go around.”

“Leave her out of this. What did Mr. Wagner ever do to you?”

“Ten percent buys your loyalty?”

“No. But I'm going to pay cash for mine.” Toby picked out a flannel shirt.

“Strangle that whiny voice. A conscience is expensive.” Travis slit open the next box. “Go on if it'll make you feel bigger. It'll get us two for the price of one.” He kicked the box over. “Use CC's line and watch Dougie's face. He'll piss himself.”

On CC's line, Travis zipped his jacket up tight. Toby placed his shirt in front of CC. “Don't forget my ten percent.”

“Make it twenty.” Travis flipped his jacket collar up. “The two of us working back there where it's freezing.”

“You know the rule. Each purchase ten percent.” CC pointed at his back pocket. “Is the knife yours?”

“It ain't a knife and it ain't yours now either is it?” He dropped the cutter on the counter, pulled out his wallet. “How much? I'm treating for his shirt.”

“With your ten percent” CC rang it up. The cash drawer sprang open.

“Here's forty.” Travis laid down two bills.

CC slid the bills in the drawer, started to count the change. “Wait.” She said. “Don't mess with me. You gave me two tens.”

“Fuck this.” Travis turned to Doug. “Hey, little man, you hear me say forty.”

Doug backed away, bumped into the candy rack.

“Don't get all snivelly little man and don't call me a liar.”

CC pressed the help button, waved the man next in line toward the other register.

Doug saw tears in her eyes. He swallowed hard, lowered his head, said, “Open his jacket.” His toes curled. Time, his breath, everything tightened.

“Open his jacket.” Travis voice rose girly like “Open his jacket. Whose jacket little man. You pissing your brains out your ears. Nobody said nothing about open anybody's jacket.” He unzipped, revealed a flannel shirt. “Eat my suspenders.”

Mr. Wagner in his down vest came out of the office. Toby picked up his flannel shirt pushed Travis ahead. “Fuck the change. This place is smelling bad.”

In a voice like to a first grader, Mr. Wagner said, “We like to give the customer the benefit of the doubt.”

“An employee, too” On their way out, Travis pocketed the box cutter.



Hank wrote. He was not coming home for the summer.

Travis drove the Toyota to Montana. Toby said he owed him for his half. He pumped gas at the Mobile station off the interstate, siphoned some to keep his neighbor's beat up Chevy going.

CC was home, caring for Mrs. Bryant full time, expecting. She was not going back to any college as dumb as she was and wasn't certain if the baby was Toby's or Travis'. On the side, using Mrs. Bryant's ingredients, she sold some of the sour dough bread she baked.

Doug, a senior, was making good money as a night janitor at the V.A. Hospital waiting for his papers to come through for the Navy.



Mail for the Carl Vincent at sea was sporadic. Before Christmas Doug got a sweater from his Mom and a thick envelope from Hank. His shoulders strained the sweater. He hesitated opening Hank's. Yearning for news made him feel younger than he wanted to be. Three years of routine had numbed him. He'd spent hours in the gym and more, with computers learning coding. He'd had one memorable moment. He'd saved a mate from plunging three decks down the iron stairwell but he knew that was reflex not courage.

He slit Hank's envelope open. A studio photo of a young woman slid out. It looked so much like CC Doug squinted. It wasn't. Same carrot hair, wide spaced eyes, half turned smile. He stared hard at the picture but it was not CC. It was Rosalind. Hank's bride. Hank was home for Easter and to get married. In his forward sloping script he wrote: Travis was dead. A one car accident. Toby went A.W.O.L. Returned dried out, sober, but still not sure what of himself had died. CC had her baby, a boy, Seth, moved to San Diego. No forwarding address. She posted on FB about baking and selling sourdough bread.

An enclosed newspaper clipping had a blurry photo of Toby. A van slid into the gas pump at the Mobile station, burst into flames. Toby pulled the emergency shut-off, called 911, yanked the driver out, dove back in the van, used a box cutter, freed a boy snarled in his seat belt. Toby was hospitalized with burns on his face and hands. The driver and boy were fine. Police credited Toby for his presence of mind and his courage. He got an award for heroism.

Mom and Dad and Rosalind sent their love.



In January Hank and Rosalind left their three children with her mother and flew to San Diego for Doug and CC's wedding.

The previous July, the Carl Vinson had returned to homeport. The ship's loudspeakers piped Doug in his dress whites ashore. A local band blared naval anthems to the disembarking sailors. Doug found the limited horizon as jarring as the unyielding pavement but knew navy life was behind him. He'd had enough sailing after heroism. Past a line of flag waving boy scouts a small, wide eyed, red haired, boy darted out, tugged on his sleeve. "My mommy says, hi."

Doug looked down, caught his breath. "Do I know you?" He thought he did.

The boy tugged again.

"What's your name?"

"Seth." Without letting go of Doug's hand the boy turned and waved.

"My name's Doug."

"I know. My mommy told me."

Doug broke ranks to greet CC.

A year and a half later, Doug had designed a WEB site for their bakery.

In bed, they discussed baby names. Having agreed on Deborah for their soon to be daughter, they'd rejected all sorts of middle names.

Doug put his ear to CC's swollen belly. "She sounds like a Deborah Theresa."

"Never." CC ruffled his hair. "No saint's name ever in my family."

"Courtney?"

"Worse. Deborah Courtney, terrible." CC laughed. "Rhinestone boots and a guitar."

"Beth. It'd kind of go with Seth."

With an effort CC pushed herself up.

Doug had never seen her blush.

"I never told you, did I." She nestled her cheek on his chest. He felt her words. "Seth's middle name's Dougie."s