

Chasing Rabbits

By Burns Ellison

Chasing Rabbits & Exorcisms

He said I'll love you till I die...
She told him you'll forget in time...
And the years went slowly by...
She still preyed upon his mind...
"He Stopped Loving Her Today"
George Jones

In the mid-1990s, at an age when most of my classmates could have been my sons and daughters, I got my graduate degree in English from the University of Colorado in Boulder. Afterwards, I taught composition classes at Flatirons Community College in Dexter, a small town twenty miles east of Boulder and the Rocky Mountains. My students were mostly kids who had grown up in Dexter or on neighboring farms and ranches, but I also had some older students, parents of grown children, retired or between jobs.

As a composition teacher in a community college, I didn't make much money. I drove a 1984-Volkswagen Rabbit, and commuted to Dexter from Boulder. It would have cost too much for me to live there if I hadn't been sharing an apartment with a graduate student in physics whom I hardly ever saw. He spent long hours in labs and when he came home went straight to his room.

I had a couple of male friends from graduate school, and now and then we'd go out for drinks in one of the Boulder bars. But I had to watch myself driving home because a few years before I had gotten a DUI. Occasionally I went out for dinner or to a movie with a woman friend from graduate school. She and I also sometimes went for hikes in the mountains. She knew I'd spent times in Alaska and she talked about how some day she wanted to go there.

The first day of each class I'd tell my students what kinds of essays they'd be working on during the semester and then ask them to write for me brief autobiographies. They could give me factual stuff like dates of their birthdays, numbers of siblings, and what their parents did for a living, but most of all I wanted them to tell me about their goals and dreams, those they'd had as children and now had as young adults. Older students, if they wished, could say something about what success they'd had in achieving their goals and dreams.

I also said that if any of them felt like what I was asking was too personal, they could be creative about it and make something up. When they were done with what I'd asked them to do, they were to take what they'd written home, type it up, and bring it to the next class.

A few students always hung around afterwards with questions, and that was how I first met Hannah Breen. She wore a Levi jacket and jeans, a western-style shirt and cowboy boots. Her face was lined and weathered, and her nose slightly askew, as though it had been broken. She had a leather purse with long tassels on it slung over her shoulder, and she was carrying a big yellow underlined tablet.

“I got a problem with what you’re wanting us to do,” she said.

“Oh?”

“I don’t have a typewriter, and if I did it wouldn’t help none because I never learned how to type.”

I told her that shouldn’t be a problem as long as she wrote or printed everything legibly so I could read it.

Then she wanted to know if I was going to be having any of these autobiographies read aloud.

I told her if somebody wrote something that I thought was an example of good writing I’d want to share it with the rest of the class. Of course if she didn’t want me to do that with hers, I wouldn’t.

“Then you’d be the only one reading what I gave you?”

I assured her that it would be for my eyes only.

The next time the class met she was absent, but the following week she was there. By then I’d read everybody else’s autobiography and made my comments. Handing papers back I told students I wanted them to rewrite what they had written for the next class because it was only through rewriting that one learned how to write. When the period was over, Hannah stopped by my desk.

“I’m afraid I’m gonna have to drop the class.”

I asked her how come.

“Well, you see, this is the third time I’ve taken one of these classes, and every time I’ve had to give it up for the same reason.”

“What’s that?”

“You’re not the first teacher wanting me to write them an autobiography. It happened twice before, and both times I couldn’t get it done.”

“But you don’t have to drop the class because of that. Look, if writing that kind of essay is a problem for you, you don’t have to do it.”

“But this is why I signed up for your class in the first place,” she said. “What you asked me to do—that’s where I’ve been wanting to get help.”

“So then what’s the problem?”

“Well, already I can see it’s gonna be the same as with them other classes I took. By the time I figure out what I want to get said on paper, I’ll have so much other stuff coming at me that I won’t ever be able to catch up. I mean here you’re already asking people to rewrite something that I haven’t even got written down to start with.”

“Okay, forget the rewrite. Just do what I asked you to do in the first place.”

“No, I don’t want any special favors. If I didn’t have nothing else to do, maybe I could do it. But I’ve got a daughter to raise, and I have to work four nights a week.”

“So why is this kind of essay so important to you?”

“I want to have something written down I can leave to my daughter Muffin so someday she’ll have a better understanding of me and what I was about. I want her to know that even if I did some bad things in my life I wasn’t really a bad person. And I’m hoping maybe she can

learn from my mistakes and do better herself. What I want to write for her is what do you call it—some other teacher once told me? It'd be like a, you know, some kind of—“

“Cautionary tale?”

“Yeah, that was it. And so I'd want to get things down like they was, because if I was to skip over things, or change them around, then what would be the use of it?”

“How old is your daughter?”

“Fourteen.”

“And she's your only child?”

“No, I had me one other that was taken away from me.”

“But Hannah, wait a minute. What you're talking about here, you're not going to be able to do all that in just a three or four page-long essay.”

“Oh, I know that,” she said. “It's gonna take me a book to get it all down. I was just hoping I'd get me some pointers from you on how to get started with it, and, you know, maybe learn how to say things better so when Muffin reads it I won't sound like some ignorant hillbilly. Which is what I am—it's just she don't need to be reminded about it.”

“Okay, if you're really serious about this here's what I'll do. You stay in the class and I'll excuse you for the rest of the semester from doing any of the other assignments I'll be giving so you can work on your autobiography. How does that sound?”

I waited for her to say something.

“Well?”

“That's real nice of you to offer that,” she said, finally. “But I don't know as I'd feel right about it. Like I said, I don't want no special favors.”

“And I won't be giving you any. For one thing, there'd be no more skipping classes.”

“Oh, I won't be doing no more of that. Only reason I wasn't here last time was because I was too embarrassed to show up without one lick of anything to hand in to you.”

I told her I would expect her to take part in classroom exercises and read the book required for the course. “What's more, I'll expect you to write something for each class, and each time I'll make my comments on it and then ask you to rewrite it. And as to the other kinds of composition we'll study, I'll ask you to incorporate them into your autobiography.”

She frowned. “Maybe you better run that by me again.”

“Okay, say you tell me you grew up on a farm. I might ask you to tell me what the farmhouse looked like, and what color was the barn. In that way you'd be writing a descriptive form of composition. Do you see what I mean?”

She nodded.

“So have we reached an understanding?”

Again she nodded, and we even shook hands.

The next class Hannah turned in a dozen pages from one of her yellow-lined tablets, and right away I had second thoughts about what I might have gotten myself into. I had an awful time trying to read her handwriting, especially with so many words misspelled, ink-smearred, and crossed-out. Sometimes she wrote in the present tense, other times in the past, and her pronouns didn't always match her antecedents. And she kept jumping around in her chronology of events and going off on so many tangents and digressions that I found myself constantly having to backtrack just to figure out where the hell I was. And if all that wasn't enough, she didn't number her pages.

I'd started to blue-pencil them with criticisms, but then I decided I'd just go through the pages and get rid of all her tangents and digressions. Then I typed up what was left, and it came out something like this:

'I was born in Clemensville, Missouri. In 1969, during the summer before my senior year in high school, I got into a fight with Richie, my first boy friend and the love of my life, when he wouldn't marry me before him and my older brother Dwight joined the army and went to Vietnam. Later that summer the carnival came to town. I went out to it one night, and when it left town I did, too, along with a carnival fellow named Lyle. The carnival went west to California and, along with becoming a carnie, I took up the life of a hippie, with sex, drugs, and the Rolling Stones.'

After she'd read my rewrite of what she'd given me, she said, "Looks like what you're telling me here is I go off chasing too many rabbits."

"Chasing what?" I said, a trifle slow on the pickup. "Well, yeah, I guess you could say that."

She nodded as though she understood, but if I thought henceforth she'd be doing less of that, I could think again. I soon found myself feeling overwhelmed by all the scribbled handwritten pages she kept thrusting upon me at the end of each class. On top of that there were all the times talking to her after classes.

Much of what she gave me, I still recall. Lyle was a mean drunk and she was about to leave him when she got pregnant. Giving up the carnival life to "settle down," they moved from one northern California town to another. In towns with names like Eureka and Yreka, Gurneyville and Yuba City, Lyle worked in the woods and on road crews while Hannah waited tables. Then Lyle became a pot grower until he got busted and thrown in jail. Hannah worked double shifts trying to pay lawyer fees, and so what happened to the baby? Did she have to give it up for adoption or lose it in a custody fight? But how likely was that? Lose her child in a custody fight to somebody who "the first thing he done after he got out of jail was run off with another woman"?

Hannah then took up with a cross-country truck driver named Melvin who drove eighteen-wheelers. She rode along with him, the two of them popping white crosses, until one night when she woke up in the cab of his truck in Little America, Wyoming, and caught him with a "truck stop groupie in the back of it." She tried to scratch the groupie's eyes out, and "I would've except Melvin got a choke hold on me till I blacked out." Then he drove off, taking the groupie with him and leaving her behind.

Next Hannah was in Elko, Nevada, working as a cocktail waitress in a casino. While in Elko she took up with a blackjack dealer for a while and then later a rodeo cowboy. The blackjack dealer was named Hurley and the rodeo cowboy was named Curly. Or maybe it was the other way around, I've forgotten. But what I haven't forgotten was that for all I still had to struggle with her misspelled words, poor penmanship, and chasing rabbits, Hannah's autobiography suddenly took on a new focus and energy when her old high school boy friend Richie came back into her life

In the early 1980s Hannah went back to Missouri to attend her father's funeral. It was the first time she'd gone home since the summer she ran off with Lyle and the carnival. Richie was living in Clemensville, and had been since he came back from Vietnam. Thanks to a letter from one of her sisters, Hannah had known this, and also that he'd been in and out of VA hospitals, had problems with drugs and alcohol, and that the women he'd taken up with over the years "had been nothing but tramps."

Hannah had decided there wasn't much point trying to get in touch with him, but then one day Richie phoned her where she was staying at her mother's to say how sorry he was to hear about her daddy, and that he would've come to the funeral except he'd been out of town working as a transit man on a surveying crew. Well, to tell the truth, he added, he didn't like funerals. She said she understood about that, and he asked how long she was going to be in town. She said only for a few days, and he said he'd like to come by sometime and say hello. She asked when he'd like to do that, and he said what about right now. She said the afternoon would be better when her ma was off to church. That would also give her time to run to the store and pick up some vodka so she could have a drink or two before he got there. After all, it had been over a dozen years since they had seen each other, and given what she'd been hearing, it might just be purely painful for her to see him again.

But then when the doorbell rang and she opened the door, there he was—the same boy she'd never stopped loving. Oh, he was older-looking and heavier, and his forehead looked bigger because he'd lost so much hair. And his eyes that had always been so blue seemed kind of clouded. But those were such little things. Now if only her brother Dwight could have been there, too.

Well, one thing led to another, and the next day when Hannah saw her ma they had a big fight about her being out all night. Her ma said her body was the temple of the Holy Ghost and that if she was going to be acting like a slut and harlot she didn't want her under the same roof. Hannah packed up her things and moved into Richie's trailer, and then a week later they drove to St. Louis and got married.

Those first few weeks Hannah couldn't remember ever having been happier. Life had given them both some hard knocks and now as though to make up for it, they had both been given second chances. Richie quit his job as transit man on the surveying crew and sold his trailer; then they bought a used Cutlass Oldsmobile and drove to Elko, where Hannah went back to her job as a cocktail waitress.

Richie, though, couldn't get any work as a transit man. He did get a job for a while as an electrician, then as a garage mechanic, and later as a TV repair man. But he wasn't very good about working regular hours, nor about taking orders. And there were all his health problems.

Hannah wrote "he gobbled pills like they was gum drops, pills for his aches and pains, ones so he could sleep nights, and then ones to get him going the next day. Then there were more pills for when he'd go into one of his funks."

Plus "the first thing he'd do when he got out of bed was light up a joint." And they both drank too much. At first she told herself "if all the booze and drugs helped to mellow him out, then maybe it was worth it." But deep down, she knew better.

She wrote about how Richie could still be like his old self, "full of fun, making you feel good just to be with him." But then the next thing "it was like he'd become possessed by devils." When instead of going off into the desert with his transit, he'd "put on his fatigues, take his guns, and go out all night, like he was on patrol and the gooks was after him."

Hannah thought the biggest reason Vietnam had such an effect on him was because of her brother Dwight. "They was best buddies all through high school, hunting and fishing, and both on the football team. Then they went to Vietnam together, and when Dwight didn't come back but he did—I think that was why he got to be so crazy."

While still in Clemensville they'd talked about having a baby, and when she got pregnant she'd seen that as part of life's giving them that second chance. Though she had to admit it had taken her by surprise. What with all the pills, booze, and dope, Richie wasn't that much of a lover.

"Oh, he could get it up," she wrote, "but the trick was to find ways to keep him from losing it."

At Richie's request she would describe to him in graphic detail what it had been like when she made love to other men. No, no, babe, he assured her, he didn't have any problem with that. Oh no, he insisted, for him it was like a real turn-on. And for a while it seemed to work, and she began to feel she could take him at his word. But, unfortunately, he did have a problem with it, as became evident from what he said one time about her being pregnant.

"All I got to say, babe, is that little bugger better have blue eyes."

Things got so bad between them that Hannah might have gotten an abortion if Richie hadn't started being good to her and vowing how he was going to be a good father. But then when the baby was born and didn't have blue eyes, Richie donned his "battle gear" and went off into the desert.

She was pretty unsparing in what she wrote about Richie and herself, and I could see why she'd had her concerns about what I might read aloud of hers to the class. In fact sometimes I wondered if I should be reading what she wrote. But then one day she told me there were some things in her autobiography she was going to change.

"I've been thinking how if Richie didn't need to hear all those things from me about being with other men that maybe there's some things Muffin doesn't need to be hearing from me."

What's more, maybe telling the truth wasn't always what it was cracked up to be.

"Like what Richie did to me that got him sent to prison—Muffin doesn't need to know that. Nor does she need to know about how Richie got stabbed to death in a fight with another convict."

I nodded, realizing this must be one more thing she'd given me that I hadn't had the chance yet to read.

"So I'm gonna change that and have it he died of cancer."

"What does your daughter think now?"

"She doesn't think one way or the other because he's nowhere in our life."

Richie began going out into the desert sometimes for a few days or more, and that was when Hannah would take Muffin, get on a bus, and go off to some other Nevada desert town like Ely, Tonopah, or Winnemucca. But, eventually, Richie would always track her down.

"And then you'd go back to him? But why?"

"Oh, don't even ask—I was a damn fool is why. He'd sweet talk me and make promises, and for a time we'd even be like a regular family."

Hannah wanted her daughter to remember the good times they'd had as a family, like when they'd gone camping in the Ruby Mountains south of Elko. She wrote about how Richie would bring his transit along and show her how to mount it on the tripod and set the bubble. Then they would all sit around the fire and sing songs and roast marshmallows.

“Oh yeah, Richie liked cowboy songs, and when he’d try to yodel like Slim Whitman, Muffin and me, we used to get such a kick out of that. Yeah, sometimes he could be a real hoot.”

But those good times came less and less often.

“It got so things was better when he’d be off in the desert. But then he quit doing that because he knew I’d take Muffin and split. Then he took to coming in where I worked, watching to see if he could catch me flirting with somebody. And after he threatened to beat the shit out of a couple of my customers, the pit boss told me if he didn’t stop coming around they was going to have to let me go. Then when I’d show up to work after he’d hit me—that was another problem. Like how would you feel if you’d gone out to have dinner and your waitress comes up to you looking like this?”

Turning away from me, she put her hands over her mouth. When she turned back she had this big gap-toothed smile on her face, and a denture in the palm of her hand.

“That’s what he did to you?”

“And that’s why my nose looks the way it does,” she said, poking it with her finger.

“And why I don’t hear so good in one ear.”

In her autobiography she mentioned more than once “the bad thing” Richie had done to her, but she never said what it was.

“Maybe because it’s nobody’s business,” she said when I asked her about it.

“Then quit bringing it up. Here you’re being so insistent about telling it like it was, ‘how the boar ate the cabbage’ as you put it—and then I keep hearing about this bad thing that he did. But that’s all I ever find out. It’s like you’re being a tease.”

She just gave me this dirty look for reply. As I was discovering, Hannah didn’t always respond that well to criticism.

Whatever the bad thing was, she was hospitalized after it happened, and Richie went to prison. Then, once out of the hospital, Hannah packed up what things of hers and Muffin’s she could get in the car and they moved to Moab, Utah. But Utah had too many Mormons, and so they moved to Rock Springs, Wyoming. Then she decided to give Montana a whirl. In Kalispell, she met a pharmacist named Otis Spradley. Hannah wrote that he was one of the few good men she had ever met. So why didn’t she write more about him?

“Oh, there’s lots more I could say about Otis, but I’m not sure I want to. We’d only been seeing each other six weeks when he asked me to marry him, and when I turned him down that was the kindest thing I ever did to him.”

What did she mean by that?

“Hon, that’s a chapter in my book I’d just as soon skip over. Otis couldn’t have been nicer to me, treating me like a lady, always buying me things and wanting to take me places. And he was real good to Muffin—which was probably why I took up with him in the first place. Trouble was, he was crazy about me, and I just never felt that way about him. In fact I treated him awful. It was like I was getting even with all the other men in my life. To make things worse, I couldn’t be around him without his getting on my nerves, and when he wasn’t getting on my nerves, he bored me.”

“Ah, Hannah, the poor guy.”

“Finally I had to tell him I didn’t love him, and when I did he broke down and cried like a baby. And call me hard-hearted Hannah, but the only thing I could think of when he was

blubbering away was that he was wanting me to feel sorry for him. Yep, I treated him pretty bad. But then I never claimed I come into this world wearing angel wings.”

Not long after that she and Muffin came to Colorado, first to Grand Junction and then Glenwood Springs, and then Dexter. So why had she always kept so much on the move?

“Because I didn’t find out Richie was dead until I was in Glenwood Springs when one of my sisters back in Missouri told me. Till then I was always afraid when he got out of prison he’d come looking for me.”

Now Hannah thought she and Muffin might stay in Dexter indefinitely. She had a good job bartending four nights a week at the Root Cellar, a bar in downtown Dexter below the Plainsview Hotel; and, what was more important Muffin was doing real good in school and making new friends.

“I grew up Pentecostal,” she once told me, adding that one of the things her ma used to go on about was how Jesus cast out devils. “Matter of fact there’s somewhere in the Bible that tells how when he did this to some sinner all these devils came out of him in the form of pigs and they ran into the sea and drowned.”

I said I remembered that from my Sunday school classes.

“Okay, so what’s a person to do if you don’t put too much stock in Jesus but you think the Bible got the devil part of it right?”

“You mean when you talk about devils, that’s not just a figure of speech?”

“Oh no, hon, they’re a whole lot more than that. Oh boy,” she said, grinning, “you must be thinking I’m crazier’n a hoot owl. You ever seen that movie *The Exorcist*?”

I nodded.

“Okay, then you’ll understand if sometime in class you see my head swivet clear around.”

“Or if I see a bunch of pigs go running out the door.”

She laughed. “Now wouldn’t that be some sort of exorcism.”

“Well, isn’t that what writing your autobiography is all about?”

She nodded. “And I got me another reason, too. After I’d made a survey of the human wreckage of my life I decided maybe if I got some of it down on paper it’d be a way for me to make amends.”

“A survey of the human wreckage of your life?”

“After I got arrested for drunk driving, I had to go to AA meetings, and that’s what I remember somebody saying.”

“I think that’s where I first heard it, too.”

She looked at me.

“Yeah, I got myself a DUI a couple of years ago.”

“You? I never would’ve thought it.”

“Well, it was kind of a fluke.”

“How was that?”

I hesitated. Was this something I should be telling one of my students? Then I realized I wanted to tell her. I’d been reading and hearing so much about her personal life—maybe if I told her something about mine, I wouldn’t feel so much like I’d taken on the role of a father confessor.

“It was when I was in graduate school. This writer from Alaska came to give a reading, and the director of the English Department had a dinner for her. He knew I’d been in Alaska, and so he asked me if I could pick her up at the faculty club where she was staying, take her to the dinner, and drive her back afterwards. Well, everybody had quite a bit to drink that night, and in the meantime it had started snowing and by the time I drove her back to the faculty club the snow was coming down so hard I couldn’t see where I was going. It was like driving in a whiteout, and I was just inching along when this police car suddenly came up from behind me flashing its red and blue lights. So it wasn’t as if I was roaring down some road at ninety miles an hour and out of control when I was pulled over.”

“But you was drunk, wasn’t you?” Hannah said.

I didn’t say anything. There wasn’t much I could say.

Springtime, the days had gotten warmer, and Hannah seemed to be wearing tighter jeans to class. And when she took off her jacket I couldn’t help noticing how much her breasts swelled under her western style shirts. There were times, too, when her shirt would be partly unbuttoned, and when I returned student papers it was hard not to glance down at her as I walked by her desk.

She was always addressing me as mister or professor. One day I told her she could call me Ed when it was just the two of us.

“Anyway, I’m not really a professor. I’m what’s called an adjunct instructor.”

“What’s that mean?”

“That I work for practically nothing. It’s like slave labor.”

“You said you used to live in Alaska. Couldn’t you make more money up there?”

“Probably, but it’s not a place I want to go back to.”

“Oh, I understand about that. I sure know there’s places I’d never want to go back to.” She paused. “Ed, I want you to know I’m mindful of how much of your time you’ve been giving me.”

I told her not to worry about it, that I enjoyed working with her.

“Well, I know it’s not much of a way to thank you for it, but if you was to stop in at the Root Cellar some night, I’ll buy you a drink.”

I told her I might take her up on that, and I think I would have, except shortly after that she started skipping classes. Actually, the first couple of times she did, I was relieved because it was near the end of the semester and I was busy with individual conferences with all my other students.

But then when a week went by and she didn’t come to class, it bothered me.

The following Friday she was there, and after class she stopped by my desk to say she was sorry about missing the previous classes but she’d been having problems with Muffin. She said she hadn’t been able to get any more writing done but that she’d have something for me Monday. Then she was out the door.

Monday she was there—face drawn, dark pouches under her eyes.

“Ed, I’ve been catching it every which way,” she said in a hoarse voice. “On top of what’s been going on with Muffin, I’ve had some sort of flu bug, probably from having to pull extra shifts at work because one of the bartenders got fired for coming to work drunk. Then I had to borrow a friend’s car to get here today because my truck’s gone dead on me, and it looks like I might need a new transmission. I told you I’d have something more for you to read, but, Ed, I just never had the chance to get at it.”

“Hannah, you have to take care of yourself. As for giving me more to read, listen, you’ve already given me plenty.”

“No, no,” she protested. “Like I said at the start, I don’t want you giving me any special treatment here.”

“Okay, then, how about this? You know those last five or six pages that I gave you back with my comments and told you to revise—”

“Yeah, I know, I haven’t been very good about that.”

“No, you haven’t, and so I want you to rewrite those pages and turn them in by Friday our last class.”

But Friday she wasn’t there, and the week after was set aside for finals. But I didn’t give finals. Instead I told my students what hours I’d be in my office so they could come by to get their last assignments back, along with their grades for the course.

When Hannah didn’t come to my office all week or leave any messages with the English Department, I was tempted to change the grade I’d given her from a C plus to a C minus. After all the time I’d spent wading through and struggling with her sometimes indecipherable scribbling in her yellow tablets, and all the time I’d spent with her after classes, talking to her, listening to her, trying to encourage her—I felt like I had been flimflammed.

But then I started to worry about her. Until the last few weeks, she’d always been so conscientious about attending classes. I wondered if she was all right. I had her phone number and so I tried to call her a few times but never got an answer. One night I called the Root Cellar, the bar where she worked. Some guy answered, and I asked for Hannah. He said she no longer worked there.

The next morning I tried her home number again, and this time she answered. When I told her who I was, she asked if I could call her back. I called again later, but no answer. I tried again that night, and then the next day. Then, a couple of days later when I called, I got a recorded message saying the number had been disconnected. That was enough—to hell with her!

Two weeks later she called to say she’d gotten her grade from me in the mail and wanted to thank me for it, that it would have served her right if I had flunked her. I told her there was never any question of that, given the amount of work she had done. She said she appreciated me saying that, but she still felt she had some explaining to do, and wondered if we could meet somewhere for a cup of coffee.

“Hannah, you don’t have to explain anything to me. Listen—”

“Oh, but I do. I don’t want things left the way they was. Ed, after what I gave of me to you to read—you’re the only person who even knows who I am.”

Hearing that struck me as one of the saddest things I’d ever heard anybody say. I asked her when she’d like to have that cup of coffee.

“Well, I got to go to Boulder tomorrow to run some errands—would sometime in the afternoon work for you?”

I didn’t see why not, and we set a time and a place. But then the next morning she called to say she had a problem, that her truck had broken down again. I said I could drive over and we could go somewhere in Dexter.

“I got a better idea,” she said. “I’ve got a friend who works nights at the Boulder Safeway. I can catch a ride with her and meet you there at six o’clock. Only thing is, you’d have to drive me back here afterwards.”

When I got to the Safeway store she was standing out in front, and it took me an instant to recognize her because I'd never seen her before in a skirt. She also had on a lightweight jacket and blouse, and when she got in my car I could smell her perfume. And she'd put on lipstick—another first. I asked her if she was ready for that cup of coffee.

"Hon, I think I'd rather have me a drink—if it's okay with you." I said fine. It was a Friday night, though, and I knew all the bars in downtown Boulder would be jammed with students. I drove east, away from the mountains. At the edge of town, not far from the junction where one road went to Longmont and the other to Dexter, I turned to her.

"Hannah, you remember telling me about those times when you and your brother Dwight used to go fishing?"

"Yeah?"

"There's something I'd like to show you."

I took the road toward Dexter, then after a few miles turned off on a country road to the north. After crossing the Sandy Creek Bridge, I drove half a mile and took a right on a tree-lined dirt road. When I came to the sign Sandy Ponds State Park I took another right into a small open area and stopped in front of a big pond next to three or four parked cars.

We got out of my car and walked up to where a man and two boys were fishing from an old wooden dock. On the other side of it a woman sat on the bank fishing with a bamboo pole and bobber. It was a warm spring evening, and the sun was just then dropping behind the mountains in a fiery blaze of red light. I told Hannah there were more ponds here besides this one, and how much they reminded me of the ones I'd fished in growing up in Nebraska.

"Yeah, my Uncle Leroy had himself one like this," Hannah said. "It was where us kids learned how to swim."

As we walked along the path around the pond I told her I'd been driving back and forth between Boulder and Dexter for over a year, never suspecting there was anything like this place until one of my students told me about it.

"I keep meaning to come here sometime and go fishing. I've been told that there are all kinds of bass and crappies in here—and big catfish, too."

Hannah had on open-faced leather sandals, and, leading her off the path I warned her to watch where she stepped. We came to a small pond closed in by willows and cottonwoods. There were fallen trees in the water, along with cattails and beds of moss. Frogs hopped through the moss, and turtles plopped into the water from dead logs. I told her that earlier in the spring I'd come out here after the creek and ponds had flooded over their banks from heavy rains when there were carp thrashing about in the waters all around me, spawning.

"It was about this same time of the evening. Only it was darker and I was alone, and hearing the sounds of those big carp—boy, it was kind of spooky."

"Oh, I bet it was," Hannah murmured, and suddenly I was remembering from what seemed another life Paul and me paddling around in a fragile, makeshift blue boat along the shores of a remote lake in Alaska, huge northern pike thrashing about, unseen, in the tall stands of water reeds—and then—on the heels of that, I was remembering one of my childhood pals and me wading in the river with pitchforks trying to spear carp. We turned around and, as we started back, Hannah talked about bringing Muffin out here. She said she'd make a picnic lunch and we could all go fishing. I asked if she'd like to see any of the other ponds. Stopping, she placed a hand on my shoulder while she stood on one foot to take off a sandal.

“Hon, I’d like to, but I’m afraid I’m not dressed for it,” she said, shaking her sandal to get rid of the thorns and stickers.

While slipping it back on, she slapped at a mosquito and one bit me on the arm. Suddenly the mosquitoes were out, and as we hurried back to my car I remembered a small out-of-the-way bar on the outskirts of north Boulder.

Only a few people were there, including two guys in hard hats playing shuffleboard. We found a table in a corner. The waitress, a woman with dyed red hair piled on top of her head, big hips and a short skirt, came over. Hannah ordered a gin martini, and I ordered a glass of red wine.

“Oh, I needed that,” she said after she’d taken a sip from her drink. She looked at me. “So you’re sure you’re not thinking the less of me for not holding up my end of the deal?”

“Hannah, if you want to know why I didn’t give you a better grade, I’ll tell you—“

“You don’t have to, I already know—I didn’t give you more revisions. And you want to know why I didn’t? The things I was trying to get said, I couldn’t hardly keep up with them myself.”

“Neither could I,” I couldn’t resist saying.

“And it’s not as if I’m against revising things. Ed, there’s times when I wish I could revise my whole goddamned life, and that’s a fact.” She downed what was left of her martini. The waitress came back and asked if she’d like another.

“Yes, I believe I would,” she said. “That is, if my friend here don’t object.”

“No, of course not,” I said, shaking my head no when the waitress asked if I was ready for another glass of wine. Hannah fished in her purse for cigarettes.

“You mind?”

“No,” I said. “It’s just that I didn’t know you smoked.”

“I don’t hardly anymore except sometimes like now when I’m having a drink.”

We talked a little about her daughter. Hannah said she’d been worried about her hanging out with kids who were into smoking pot. Then she mentioned she’d been having a problem with this guy coming into the bar all the time and bugging her.

“I guess you could call him a stalker.”

“Is that why you quit working there?”

She gave me a quick look. “How’d you know that?”

“I tried to call you there one night. Hannah, I was worried about you.”

“Aw, hon, that’s real sweet of you,” she said, reaching for my hand. “I should’ve been better about letting you know how things were.”

“Is this guy still a problem?”

She nodded.

“So have you called the police?”

“Oh yeah, I got a restraining order put out against the son of a bitch.”

“Hannah, can I ask you something?”

“Of course you can.”

“How is it you keep attracting these kinds of guys? All the ones you’ve written about and told me about, and now, for Christ’s sake, you’ve got somebody stalking you!”

"I know, and I'm trying to see if I can change that. Maybe that's why I like being with you... Oh, now, don't get all shook up," she said, giving my knee a squeeze. "You're safe, hon, I'm not gonna take advantage of you."

"Well, that's a load off my mind."

"Now can I ask you something?"

"Why not? After everything you've been telling me."

"You're not gay, are you?"

I shook my head.

"Well, I'll have me a drink on that," she said, lifting her glass. "My luck with men being what it's been, I was figuring sure as I meet somebody who's a nice guy he'll be married or turn out to be gay. I didn't think you were, but these days you never know. You ever been married?"

"There were a couple of times when I might as well have been. We just never made it official."

"You mean like that woman you said something about one time—the one who got cancer?"

I nodded.

"You still think about her?"

"Oh, every now and then."

"How long ago was it she died?"

"It was some years ago."

"You said you'd never wanta go back to Alaska. Is that on account of her?"

"Yeah, that's part of it, anyway."

"Ed, it ain't none of my business, but you know, sometimes you've gotta let go of things."

I excused myself to go to the john. When I came back I saw that the waitress had brought us another round of drinks, both of them martinis. I asked Hannah if she was trying to get me drunk.

Thrusting one of her legs across my lap, she said, "So what if I was?" As I began stroking her leg, I noticed the small cuts on it. I asked her what she had done to herself.

"That's where I cut myself shaving," she said. "I guess I've gotten out of practice from hardly ever wearing a skirt anymore. Oh yeah," I like that," she said. "Anybody ever tell you what soft hands you got?"

"Not for a long time."

"You mean you don't have somebody you're seeing? All these women in Boulder—hon, what's wrong with you?"

"Well, for one thing, I can't afford these Boulder women," I said. "And for another, you get involved with somebody, and there are always complications."

"Yeah, babe, tell me about it," she said. "Ed, can I ask you something else?"

"Why stop now?"

"How long has it been since you've been with a woman?"

"It's been a while."

"That's what I thought."

"Oh yeah? What made you think that?"

"Oh, I could tell."

The waitress came with another round of martinis. Our chairs pushed closer together, I was now using both hands to massage her leg.

"Oh, hon, that feels real good."

I glanced around. The two guys playing shuffleboard had left, and the waitress was sitting with an older couple at the bar, the bartender standing across from them. They were having

drinks, talking and laughing. Above them, the TV was on, but nobody was watching it. I looked back at Hannah. She was staring at me.

“I got something else to ask you,” she said.

“Yeah?”

“What would you think if I was to lean over and kiss you?”

“I think I’d like that.”

Lowering her leg from my lap, she leaned over, and then her tongue was in my mouth and mine in hers.

“Oh my,” she said, pulling back. Licking her lips, she picked up a bar napkin and wiped her lipstick from my mouth. We kissed again, and then her mouth to my ear she whispered, “And I bet there’s something else you’ve been wanting to do.” She took my hand and placed it on one of her breasts. “Oh yeah, I seen in class how you liked to look down at my boobs.”

I glanced over at the bar to make sure nobody was watching us. She wasn’t wearing a bra, and I could feel how hard her nipple was. I squeezed it.

“Oh yeah, pinch it, hon. Yeah, do it like that—only harder.”

We kissed again, grinding our mouths together, and then, her hand in my lap, she was biting the lobe of my ear and whispering, “Oh, and I can tell there’s other things you’d like to do to me, too.”

Too breathless to speak, I could only nod.

“Hon, slip your hand under my blouse... Oh yeah, you got my nipple feeling like it was on fire, now the other one, yeah... yeah... Oh, babe, you know what I’m wanting, I’m wanting for you to take me away from here and then for you to rip off my bodice and ravish me!”

I pulled back from her. “Rip off your bodice and ravish you?”

“Yeah, that’s what’s always happening to the heroines in them romance novels I read... Oh, babe,” she said, laughing. “If you could see the look on your face—you look like you just swallowed a peach pit! What? Hasn’t anybody ever said that to you before?”

“No, Hannah, I have never had a woman say that to me before. You’re the first.”

“Well, hon, I might be the first for some other things, too.” Nuzzling my ear, she rose to her feet. “Excuse me, I gotta go pee. Order me another drink, would you.”

Watching her walk away, I thought about what it would be like to rip away her bodice and then for both of us to get ravished. Then I thought about all the times we’d spent with each other after classes talking about her autobiography. Jesus, what was wrong with me? Why hadn’t I ever asked this woman if sometime she wouldn’t like to go out to dinner, or to a movie? And all those nights when I was bored and didn’t know what to do with myself, why hadn’t I ever stopped in at the Plainsview Hotel in downtown Dexter and moseyed down into the Root Cellar?

But then I knew the answer to those questions. For all practical purposes, I had shut down, given up, didn’t want any more trouble. And given what I knew about her from everything she’d written and told me—boy, talk about trouble! What was it somebody once said? Never sleep with anybody whose troubles are worse than your own. Only I’d taken that a step further. Since everybody has troubles, better not to sleep with anybody—especially if she was a student.

On the other hand, I was no longer her teacher. Besides, given that she was an older woman if wasn’t as if I was trying to rob the cradle. What’s more, for all that her poor grammar made me grate my teeth and the only books she ever read were like what she’d just told me, Harlequin romance novels—bodice-rippers, for Christ’s sake, given what we’d both been through, that

might work in our favor. But then look at her and the love-of-her-life Richie—hadn't they both been through it and look how that turned out. Besides, what did I have to offer her? Still, given all the jerks and creeps in her life, I couldn't look too bad. Except maybe for that one guy, Orin Spradley the pharmacist—yeah, and look how she had treated him. And what about this guy who was stalking her now? Yeah, that was something else to think about.

I looked around for the waitress but didn't see her. I didn't see the older couple, either, but the bartender was behind the bar washing glasses. When he saw me motioning to him, he came over. With a short scraggly beard, long sideburns, and a ponytail, he looked like an old hippie. I ordered another drink for Hannah.

"You want the same?"

"Sure, why not?"

"Okay," he said, "but you've only got fifteen minutes to drink up."

I looked at my watch. "But it's not even eleven o'clock."

"Yeah, man, but there's nobody here but you and your lady friend, and by the looks of it what the two of you need is a motel more than a bar."

Then I remember we had left Boulder and were on the road to Dexter, and she was fiddling with the radio to find some music. Only it seemed she had gotten awfully quiet. Finally she spoke.

"Ed, I should've told you. I moved—I'm not living in Dexter no more."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I had to give up my place on account of this guy, the one I told you about."

"But what about the police? I thought you'd put out a restraining order against him."

"They said there wasn't much they could do until he'd done something to me, and I didn't want to wait around for that to happen, so I moved."

"Okay, so where?"

At first she didn't say anything. "Well, it's back where we just left."

"You mean Boulder?" I looked over at her. She nodded.

"Shit, why didn't you tell me?"

I took the first ramp I came to, and pulled off the side of the road.

"Hannah, what's going on here?"

"Ed, there's things I've been wanting to tell you—it's just I didn't know how."

"Okay, fine, you don't have to. The only thing you have to tell me now is where you're living in Boulder so I can get you back there."

"All right, you want to know what else I haven't told you? You remember me telling you how that bartender got fired because he was coming to work drunk? Okay, I lied about that. That was me that got fired and I was too ashamed to tell you. Ed, I hadn't had a drink in over two years until all this shit started coming down on me."

"And so all that about you catching a ride with somebody who worked at the Safeway—you were already in Boulder, weren't you?"

She nodded.

"Hannah," I said, feeling so exasperated I just wanted to bang my head against the steering wheel, "what I don't understand is that after everything you've been writing and telling me about, I mean, Jesus, all this really personal stuff from your life, why didn't you feel you could tell me about any of this? I don't understand."

“Because I didn’t want to be putting any of this shit on you. It wasn’t for you to have to deal with.”

“But now I am having to deal with it, for Christ’s sake! Talk about untrustworthy narrators, you take the cake. And so how’s your daughter dealing with all this?”

“It’s been real bad for her,” she said. “That’s why she’s in Boulder, too, in one of them group homes for kids.”

“And all this is on account of this guy who’s been stalking you?”

She nodded.

I sat there wondering when the hell was I going to learn. Talk about being a fool for love. Or was it being a fool for just being so fucking lonely? And wishing I hadn’t had that last drink—or the first one either—I found myself listening to the words of the song being sung on the country western radio station she had found:

‘He kept her picture on the wall...
Went half crazy now and then...
He still loved her through it all...
Hoping she’d come back again...’

The words to the song were lugubrious, yet I kept listening to them:

‘Kept some letters by his bed...
Dated...1962...
He had underlined in red...
Every single I love you...’

And then I was remembering Louise and how after I’d come back from Alaska and finding out why I hadn’t heard from her all that time I’d gone to New York City in the spring (I remember it was then because the trees along the sidewalks and in Central Park were white with blossoms) to see her while she was in the Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. Nights, the nurses let me stay with her after visiting hours. Doctors were giving her morphine for the pain and I would sit at the foot of her bed and massage her feet with lotion as she drifted in and out of consciousness. Sometimes she’d speak a few words dreamily, but then her voice would trail off and she would begin to moan. One night while massaging her foot I leaned down and kissed her big toe. Then I put her toe in my mouth and began sucking it, and when she stopped moaning I did the same with each of her other toes. Then I began doing the same thing with the toes of her other foot. And I knew why I was doing this. I didn’t want just to suck the pain out of her. I wanted to swallow it—make of her pain my own. I wanted to deny death her dying.

She woke up, crying I mustn’t do that and that I should wash out my mouth—she’d been walking about barefooted and this was a cancer ward! I told her that given all the lotion I’d been using her feet should be thoroughly sanitized. When she didn’t protest further, I resumed, mouth fastened on one of her toes, like some grotesque parody of a vampire—this vampire, however, not seeking the heroine’s blood but that which was devouring her from within—

—“Ed, hon, you okay? Ed, we can’t just be sitting here like this.” As I turned the car around to get us back on the road to Boulder, I asked for her address.

“Ed, can’t we go to your place?”

Earlier I wouldn’t have worried about the guy I shared my apartment with, but now I wasn’t about to take her there. I asked her again.

“I don’t want to go there.”

I glanced at her. “Why not?”

“Cause it’s a halfway house.”

“Halfway house? What kind of place are you talking about?”

“How many kinds is there that you have to ask such a dumb question?” she snapped. “A halfway house for drunks and dope addicts! And I can’t be having guests.”

“Believe me, that’s no problem,” I snapped back. “Just tell me where it is.”

“Hon, I know you’re mad at me, but let me explain—I can’t go back there. This guy I’ve been talking about—he might be there waiting for me.”

“What? He knows about the place, too?”

“I don’t know for sure, but I don’t want to be taking any chances.”

“Wait a minute. You mean this guy could be following us right now?” I glanced through my rear view mirror. Jesus, what I had I gotten myself into?

Hannah looked behind her. “You don’t have to worry none. I know what he’s driving.”

“Oh yeah—what’s that?”

When she didn’t say anything I asked her again.

“He’s got my pickup.”

Slowing my car almost to a crawl, I turned to her. “He’s got your pickup! Hannah—”

“Look, when he first started coming around, I thought he was okay. So when he asked me once if he could borrow it, I let him.”

“Well, then call the fucking cops on him!”

“Wouldn’t do no good.”

A truck roared by blaring its horn. “Hannah, how long have you known this guy?”

And even as I asked, I knew the answer.

“Yeah,” she said, staring ahead, “it’s Richie. Sooner or later, I knew he’d find me,” she added with what was almost a note of triumph in her voice.

I didn’t know what to say. First she’d written in her autobiography that Richie was stabbed to death in a fight with another convict. Then for Muffin’s sake it was going to be that he died of cancer. Now it seemed that neither of those versions was true.

So how much was I to believe about everything else she had written? But then wasn’t I always telling my students to feel free to make things up? But this was different. She was no longer just one of my students.

“Hannah, not that I give a shit anymore, but why’d you say he was dead?”

“Because as far as I was concerned, he was dead. ‘Cause the Richie I loved—him and my brother, they both died when they was in Vietnam.”

“Oh, that’s bullshit! Here you were going to give me the unvarnished truth in what you wrote—remember? So you could get rid of all your devils.”

“All right, so I lied about that. Richie’s not dead, but he wants to be—and he wants me dead with him.”

“Oh, don’t give me that shit either! You know what I think is going on with you and your fucking Richie? Christ, you said it yourself. You knew sooner or later he’d find you—and if he hadn’t, you would’ve found a way to see to it that he did. And I’m sure that will give you all kinds of terrific stuff to write about. It’s just that I don’t want to be any part of it.”

And of course there was another reason I didn’t want to be any part of it. I didn’t want to find myself having to contend with some crazy violent ex-convict, jealous husband and Vietnam

veteran still going through some kind of post-traumatic stress disorder syndrome. I kept driving, and once more in Boulder turned up Broadway.

“Okay, so where is this place?” I asked.

“It’s on the other side of the campus—but, Ed, I can’t go there. If I show up with alcohol on my breath, they won’t let me in.”

“And I can’t take you to where I live.”

“But you don’t understand—“

“Oh, believe me, I do.”

“No, you don’t! You don’t know what he’s capable of. Ed, you know that bad thing I told you about? He tried to kill me! He took his pistol and he shot me seven times!”

Then she started going on about all the surgeries she’d had and how that was why she still had such stomach pains and how doctors had told her she was a medical miracle to even still be alive. But by now I didn’t believe—or didn’t want to believe—any of what she was saying. And not wanting to hear any of it, I tuned out on her, hearing instead the words to that same lugubrious song:

‘I went to see him just today...
Oh, but I didn’t see no tears...
All dressed up to go away...
First time I’d seen him smile in years...’

Approaching downtown Boulder, I stopped at a red light.

“You don’t believe me”—suddenly she was pulling up her blouse—“feel this!” Grabbing my hand from the wheel, she began rubbing it against her belly and I felt all this hardened, eroded flesh—what had to be scar tissue. The light was green—somebody honking his horn. Wrenching my hand away from her, I drove on.

“Ed, if you can’t take me to your place, let me out!”

“Hannah—“ Struggling to stop her from jumping out of the car, I turned off Broadway to go to my apartment. Then, realizing I’d turned onto a one-way street the wrong way, I hit the breaks and slammed into reverse. Looking behind me as I backed up, I saw the police car parked down the street. As I shifted into first to keep going on Broadway, I again looked behind me. Sure enough, the police car was coming after me.

I slowed down to the siren and flashing of red and blue lights. Pulling over to the curb, I dug out my billfold and gave her what money I had and told her to find a motel. She was already on her way down the sidewalk as the police car eased to a stop. One of the two officers got out and walked toward me. I sat and waited—the refrain from that same song still running through my head.

‘He stopped loving her today...
They placed a wreath upon his door...
And soon they’ll carry him away...
He stopped loving her today...’

Late afternoon two days later, Hannah showed up at my door with a beat-up old suitcase and a laundry bag full of clothes. She wanted to know how things had gone the other night. I told her that I had spent the night in the Boulder drunk tank. She said she was real sorry about that. I said I was, too.

“Ed, you’re the only friend I got,” she said, “or I wouldn’t be asking this of you.” She wanted to know if she and Muffin could stay with me that night and then if I could drive them the next day to a women’s shelter in Fort Collins. That is, if I still had my driver’s license. I told her I still did, at least for now. I asked her about Richie. She said she’d called the cops on him for stealing her pickup and they were out looking for him. Unfortunately, they still hadn’t found him or her pickup.

I drove her to the group home and waited in the car while she went inside to get Muffin. Then we went to a restaurant and had dinner. Muffin was a pretty girl, but I don’t remember her ever saying anything. When we got back to my apartment I gave them my bedroom and slept on the couch. The guy I shared the apartment with came in late and we never saw him.

The next morning I drove them to Fort Collins and dropped them off in front of a Seven Eleven store. I parked my car down the street from there until two women in a Chevrolet station wagon pulled up. One of them got out and helped Hannah and Muffin put their things in the back of it, and then they all got in and drove off. When I got back to my apartment I found a note on the refrigerator complaining about the smell of cigarettes. I checked my bedroom and found a saucer full of cigarette butts under my bed, along with an empty pint bottle of vodka.

A few nights later, Hannah called. She said she was sorry about all the trouble she’d caused me, and wondered if maybe sometime after things had gotten themselves straightened out we could see each other again. She talked about the possibility of her and Muffin and me, the three of us, going back to that place where I’d taken her and going fishing. She gave me a phone number and told me when she thought it would be okay to call her back. When I did, the woman who answered told me it was against house rules for the women there to receive phone calls. She also said it was against house rules to give messages to anybody there, or for anybody there to receive mail. For awhile I thought Hannah might try to call me again, but she never did.

Later that summer, before I lost my driver’s license, I got permission from my probation officer to drive to Nebraska to visit my mother. While there I went to my weekly classes in alcohol rehabilitation and then, instead of assigning the topic to students, I decided I’d write my own autobiography. I would begin it back in the 60s when, wishing to embark upon a great adventure, I went north to Alaska, where I first met Louise.