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The Folklore Muse

Frank de Caro

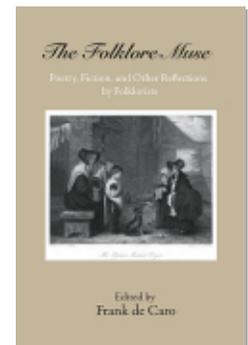
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Fieldwork, Folk Communities, Informants

Ethnography and intensive fieldwork live at the heart of what folklorists do. Going “into the field”—observing traditions, listening to people, recording their songs and stories and riddles and personal accounts and descriptions—is what provides the cultural understandings that folklorists use in their work. Folklorists come to know communities and “informants” (though that term, sanctioned by decades of use, may strike some as too impersonal, even slightly clinical), and complex relationships often evolve between folklorists and their folk collaborators, relationships that may involve years of human interaction and many layers of meaning. Though historically folk traditions have been presented analytically or, often, just as transcribed “texts,” more personal means of communicating how folklorists relate to the environments in which they operate and about the very processes involved become increasingly appropriate.

Several writers in this section speak of the fieldwork experience, of this process fundamental to folklorists and their work (folklore having been called a “listening profession”). Cynthia Levee’s poem “White Bluffs and Miss Lena” takes the reader on a field trip around a small Southern city, derived from Levee’s researches into Southern Jewish culture; it lets the reader hear how an informant makes sense of a personal cultural reality. My own “Oral History” conflates encounters with several informants who spoke of their lives during the days of the British Raj in India, while it also comments on some of the ambiguities of memory and recording memory. Jens Lund’s memoir “Karl and Janie” comes out of his fieldwork for the Smithsonian’s Festival of American Folklife in 1975 (and says much about how the folklorist, initially a stranger, learns about a community). Several of Margaret Yocom’s poems came out of her fieldwork, too, though in her case the connection may not be so obvious, as three of the poems are about the natural landscape of her fieldwork area in Maine, not her cultural encounters. There is, she says, “a loneliness to fieldwork . . . an aloneness that is right and fitting” and “these poems speak to that loneliness, to thoughts of distant friends, and to grace, grief, and sensuality that life continually places before us.” Her “Opening Camp” addresses the aloneness of first coming each June to the small “camp,” the cabin she and her husband John bought in her fieldwork area, to which John will not follow until later in the summer.

And though Ted Olson in “Historical Sign” and William Bernard McCarthy in “Second Growth” look at how the overlay of time affects present-day perceptions

of landscape—cultural as well as physical—they also speak of things encountered while poking about in the landscape of fieldwork, as well as the literal landscape. These are the sorts of discoveries folklorists make by accident and by design when they go out to encounter what's out there. In "Margaret," Steve Zeitlin speaks very much of personal involvement in the fieldwork experience, writing about an ethnographer and photographer who documented the lives of New York's homeless populations but who became more than a documentarian to some of these people. His poem "Cat," however, looks more at the "informant" side, giving us "a section from an oral history interview" with a former prostitute, one of two whom he interviewed for a radio commentary about a creative writing program for men and women with AIDS; they were "among the most articulate and passionate people I've ever interviewed," Zeitlin says.

Neither Jeff Todd Titon's short story "Percy" nor Teresa Bergen's novel *Bigfoot Stole My Husband* looks at fieldwork as such but both deal with the sorts of communities that folklorists often encounter. Titon's story—set on a Maine island like the one where the author is sometimes a summer, sometimes a year-round resident—examines fictionally how folk crafts are learned, how those learning contexts change, and how what is authentic in folk art may challenge common conceptions. The story has a quiet irony and a protagonist who remains true to himself while it raises questions about folk and non-folk aesthetics and the consuming of traditional arts, as well as the role of visitors from outside and of tourism in the perception of folklore. Bergen's community is less one of place, more one of intense organization around the shared interests that may constitute a lore, in this case, tracking down a legendary creature. Here we have only her first chapter, but it captures the outlines of the group, letting us in on some of its conflicts, concerns, and shared understandings.

Indeed, the centrality of fieldwork is hardly limited to the pieces in this section. In other sections, Rosan Augusta Jordan's poems stem from her fieldwork in Oaxaca, Mexico, observing the Days of the Dead celebrations there; Holly Everett writes of documenting the tradition of constructing roadside shrines for accident victims; Norma Cantú's protagonist looks at religious ceremonies in Spain; and other contributions are certainly based on fieldwork experiences, though the influence may be indirect.

Oral History

Spools of memory take up the voice,
Wrap up the past on rolling mylar,
File used-to-be around whirring reels.
The cassette spins like mad Andromache,
Fearing loss of some yesterday
The mind still holds, like a forsaken lover
Holds a shirtsleeve, a letter, or a kiss.

It is the recorder that feels the passion
To record. The speaker may strain to remember,
May cast the past up with delight,
Or try to dodge this bullet, recollection.
Some speakers may be quite indifferent:
“I only did that for two years, until
More interesting pleasures came my way.”

He sits in an Irish seaside house,
Never speaking when the interviewer comes
Of what all his service called “Howard’s error.”
He laughs at mistaking papaya seeds for caviar
On his first train beyond Calcutta,
Talks of engaging a syce in Dacca,
Even of dressing for dinner once in the mofussil,
As if to confirm a myth. But never of his error:
How when a mob attacked his bungalow one night,
He did not follow “standard procedure,”
Did not just shoot dead the first man or two,
Firing instead above their heads,
As though Heaven would gently soothe this murderous gang.
They beat him nearly dead and then moved on.

Howard’s error.
This is his great secret
That never finds its way to tape.

Another sits in a Shropshire cottage,
Prime minister once of a small Himalayan state:
Allowed to shake hands
With the sons of the raja's official concubines
 (never with the unofficial, who existed
 but could not be touched,
 a better class of outcaste).
The taping over, he passes on *his* secret then:
He was a Black Heart, one of the band of bachelors
Who gave the celebrated Simla ball. They had a motto
One secret word of which was always missing
From its public printing. He tells the interviewer that word.

The interviewer takes no notes
And in later years forgets
This great comic minor mystery
Of the Raj.

The spools of memory have their glitches,
Their eighteen minute gaps.
We cannot get it all, whatever's chosen:
Tape, parchment, brain cells alone,
Archives, computers, film.
The heart evades, language fails, remembrance runs dry.
We grasp at the pieces, netting butterflies blown by,
And rightly marvel at their colored wings,
Bright like the sea at Bombay,
Rich as the carpets
That came down the Khyber in spring.

White Bluffs and Miss Lena

Rise sheer from the Tombigbee
in Demopolis of the people a city
*You can visit but
I don't know if I'll have anything for you*
The youngest of the handful of Jews
at eighty-five picks me up in her Chrysler
Eager to show the tourist postcard of
*the house I grew up in
Moved from a plantation after the Civil War
I feel it's still mine
Moved out seventy years ago
See on the corner it's holding up well*
We visit
the Jewish cemetery
the black loamy Alabama soil
Her plot saved next to her
*husband was so sick and then he died
before he could look for this one cousin
we thought was still alive
in Czechoslovakia whatever they call it now*
So I searched and found
*the temple and the cousin
so happy to meet me too*
Acres of green grass
Markers from 1800's
wandering over
The first Jewish peddler
settled his family business
King Cotton and hundreds of Jews
into the twentieth century
Valedictorian of her high school class
She doesn't want me to take her picture
*We saw every Broadway play by Lillian Hellman
whose mother was a Newhouse from Demopolis
grandmother a Marx
sharp tough hard retailers
Lillian looked like the Marxes
knew how to trade
horses and mules*

*North Walnut Avenue and Washington Street
The Marx Brothers sold to the Robertsons
Issac Marx built B'nai Jeshurun Temple
Home of the Righteous and Beloved
They'll let us visit
They keep it up for us now
Never had a rabbi
Now a small wooden room
Ten rows of chairs
Three hundred year old Torah
I do have wonderful memories
Every Friday night
we read in English from the Union Prayer Book
I talk to my daughter every day
She married locally
He said the children could attend services
but it was a different story
after they were born
So I have six grandchildren
none Jewish
but I read them the prayerbook
and the other day one recited
Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart
 with all thy might
Another calls long distance
It's wonderful to have someone who takes advice
My son went off to school has no children
Helped set up the college fund for the others
Time to sit down for chocolate cake
a business partner of my husband still mails at Christmas
Do you know Jews up north don't even have Christmas
Dabs her eyes with a handkerchief
Holidays are sad when those you love are gone
My nice china and silver's at my daughter's
Isn't it wonderful we had our weekend*

Steve Zeitlin

Margaret,

Photographing the structures of the homeless
in early morning light

Homes resembling a nest, a cave,
a house on wheels
homes built in the darkness of a tunnel
under the West Side Highway
in the ironic hollow of a Bloomingdale's bin.

Mr. Lee's shanty covered with oranges
for the Chinese New Year

Where Margaret arranged for the funeral
for she was the nearest of kin

—inspired by the work of Margaret Morton

Cat

I was a stripper
I lived in a make pretend world of sexual images
I danced in costumes
I was happiest when I was in a dark room, scantily dressed

I tried to dance one last time
I got up there on stage three weeks ago at this place where
I'd danced in Chelsea
I just wanted to capture the old feeling one last time
and it had changed
Leaving all that behind is a grieving process
But it no longer works for you—
I'm much too wise for all that now
You're given the time that you're given and then it's gone

If I long for anything, it's the ignorance I used to have
Every bit of wisdom narrows my path, that's cool
I've got to walk the good path, whatever that may be
But sometimes I just long for the fucking banal ignorance
of that little girl junkie stripper motherfucker whore
And that leniency I had on myself—before

—transcribed from an oral history interview with Cat Yellen

Karl and Janie

Rook Lake is like many small towns in northwest Wisconsin. It is an ethnic mosaic of Slavs, Scandinavians, Germans, and Irish, and almost everybody is either Lutheran or Catholic. Streets are shaded by broadleaf trees, planted there early in the century. Outside of town, the area is surrounded by spindly pine forest, broken up by an occasional pasture. Most of the open areas are growing over in brush because the small-scale dairy farms that used to be so numerous here are now uneconomical. Most of the black-and-white Holsteins you do see are pets or one family's source of fresh milk. The pine woods were cut over late in the last century and most of the trees that weren't already harvested by then were taken away by a series of forest fires a few years later.

Unlike most of the other lake-name towns, Rook Lake's namesake is right in town; the town is built on its shores and many of the houses are lakefront property. Since there is little opportunity for employment in the area, most of the inhabitants are old. A few young people stay to work for the highway department or the school district or the hospital up in Werner or the nearby trout hatchery. There are, of course, also a small complement of service workers—store clerks, a plumber, a few bank clerks, two auto mechanics, and so on. A few people still log part-time, but the old timber industry and its sawmills died out by the 1950s.

Many of the retired farmers and loggers now live in town, filling up the double-wides on the cul-de-sacs in the developments on the far end of the lake. Beyond the developments is a small airport, formerly operated by the U.S. Forest Service and now used only by private pilots.

Several people told me that I should visit Karl Berg. He was a second-generation Swede, retired from both the farm and the woods. His primitive paintings could be seen in banks, in the local hardware store, and even in some of the area's taverns. The last was surprising because everybody said that both Karl and his wife, Janie, were strict teetotalers, who had quit the Rook Lake Lutheran Church years ago when a new pastor had allowed the serving of *glögg* at a Christmas party.

The Bergs were now said to drive all the way to Rice Lake to attend the Evangelical Covenant Church every Sunday—a good hour and a-half each way.

People liked the Bergs. They were nice folks but a little strange, especially devoid of a sense of humor. A tragedy had evidently happened to them at one time, but no one volunteered to tell me what it was. They liked Karl's paintings, most of which were landscapes, and many of which depicted rustic scenes of Holsteins in a pasture or dozers hauling logs to a mill.

The Bergs lived in a double-wide right on the lake. Unlike most of the lake properties, they had neither a boat nor a dock. I noticed this, because I had to go the back door, which faced the lake. The front door was not on a path and came right out into a planting of little bushes. It was obviously not in use.

A short skinny man in a seed cap invited me in and introduced me to his wife. Even though they were born in the U.S.A., both had a slight touch of a Swedish accent. They probably grew up speaking Swedish at home. He was very friendly and more than glad to entertain me and show me some of his paintings. His wife was very hospitable, immediately making a fresh pot of coffee for me, but her personality was much colder. She didn't seem to want to talk, but she often briefly interrupted him as he was telling me something, usually to correct a minor detail. Mostly he told me about his life as a farmer, a logger, and a sawmill hand, and how his father had also been an artist, working in watercolors, and how he himself liked these new acrylics. When I tried to steer the conversation toward his wife, to try to get a feeling for her life, she would reply to my questions in one-sentence answers. I found out that they had recently observed their fiftieth wedding anniversary. I asked Mrs. Berg if they had had a celebration.

"No," she said. "Nobody to celebrate with." I thought this was an odd remark.

"I hope you celebrated with each other," I thought, but I didn't think it appropriate to say that aloud. I noticed an autoharp lying on a nearby sofa.

"Do you play?" I asked. Karl started to answer but his wife cut him off.

"We only sing religious songs," she said stiffly.

"Would you play and sing for me?" I asked.

Karl sat down on the sofa and picked up the autoharp. He started to strum. Soon he was playing a lively version of "Golden Slippers." I couldn't help chuckling to myself that *she* probably thought that it was a religious song, rather than the sacrilegious song that it really was. Karl Berg was quite good on that thing. He could even play melodies and counterpoints, rather than just the chord progressions most people played on an autoharp. As the speed of the tune picked up, I noticed her giving him a cold stare. He brought the tune to a halt with a "shave-and-a-haircut . . ." and immediately began a slow version of "Fairest Lord Jesus." She sang it in Swedish, in a high reedy voice. She carried a tune well but age had weakened her vocal abilities.

Jane Berg kept me well-supplied with fresh coffee and eventually opened a package of Lorna Doone cookies, which she arranged in a little china bowl and set

on the coffee table. After a while, I could tell that they were both glad to have company. Maybe they didn't get many visitors. But despite this, she was uncomfortable with me being there, especially with Karl playing his autoharp tunes. Most were hymns, and she would glower if he picked up too much speed.

During a break in the music, she went out in the kitchen to start some more coffee. He immediately launched into his *pièce de résistance*, "Stars and Stripes Forever." I'd never heard anybody play that on the autoharp before. This man had talent. I wondered what else he could play. She came back into the room and spoke sharply: "Karl!"

"For heavens sakes, Janie, it's a patriotic song. Don't you like patriotic songs?" This was the first and only time I heard him talk back to her but the spirit of the tune was lost. He played it through one more time, half-heartedly, and then immediately launched into another hymn. I think it was a version of "There Is a Fountain."

I had now been there for a good two hours, and I feared I might be wearing out my welcome. I made up an excuse about another appointment that I had to make, and reached for my coat.

"Wait a minute," said Mrs. Berg. "Before you go, let me tell you something. We haven't always been this way, you know."

"Well, it seems to me," I protested, "you've been very nice to me. Shared your coffee and cookies and music and paintings. I certainly wouldn't ask for any more."

She kept going in her own direction. "We got this way because of tragedy. That's why. You can never know what it's like, the way we lost our son, last year. You seen that little airport over beyond them trees? That's where it happened."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I didn't know."

"Well, I'm going to tell you, now, and it's not a pretty story. Then maybe you'll understand." Karl sank deep into his upholstered chair. His chin dropped to his chest and his eyes closed.

"That airport over there," she continued. "Our son, he was a fine young man, a good boy, a Christian. Didn't care for none of that jazz stuff. Just had one fault. He loved them airplanes. Would do anything to get to fly in one. We're just plain, ordinary folks. We didn't have no money for no airplanes or no airplane rides. Jakey, he fell in with them flyin' boys, who used to fly for the Forest Service and some of them even just for the fun of it. Jakey'd hang around that airport just so he could get a ride. I told him not to, but he was a young man now and didn't always do what we said. One day, one of his flyin' fool friends was out there in his airplane, parked on the ground, motor runnin', propeller goin' roun' and roun'. He hollered at Jakey, 'Come on along! Want a ride?' Jakey ran out there, didn't look where he was goin', ran right into that spinnin' propeller. Whole top of him was cut to bits. Had to have the funeral with the coffin closed." She paused.

"Now you see what I mean? Now you see why we're the way we are?"

Of course, the tale was dreadfully depressing. I was embarrassed that I had disturbed the old couple in their grief. Still, Karl had appeared relatively cheerful

whenever his wife was out of earshot. I expressed my condolences awkwardly but the best I could. I bid the couple goodbye, excused myself and headed out to the car. Just as I was about to drive off, someone tapped on my window. It was Karl Berg.

I rolled down the window and he smiled and handed me one of his paintings. “You come again some time, OK? I’ve got lots more tunes. Sorry about the old woman. She’s still takin’ it pretty hard.”

“Well, I can certainly understand that,” I told him. “That was a terrible tragedy.”

“Yep,” he said, and headed back to the double-wide. I thought I heard a cry of “Karl?”

I drove back to the motel and lay awake a long time pondering the tragic tale and the continuing tragedy of the old woman who couldn’t let her husband get over the loss of their son.

The next day, I had another appointment in Rook Lake. It was with the Markivs, a Ukrainian family, who sang and played traditional Ukrainian music. Turns out they lived just across the little inlet in the lake from the Bergs.

And they couldn’t have been more different. A handsome, middle-aged father, his beautiful wife, and their three teenaged sons—all of them easygoing, laughing, full of jokes. They sang their songs and played their traditional instruments, accordion and many-stringed *banduri*. They invited me for dinner. It was a downright festive afternoon and evening. Mr. Markiv was a consulting engineer. He had grown up in the county and moved back after his business flourished. He traveled about half the year visiting various construction sites all over North and South America. But his passion was the family musical ensemble, to which he devoted most of the rest of his time.

“So, who else have you visited around here?” he asked me between mouthfuls.

“Well, for one, the Bergs, over there.”

“You visited Karl Berg?” said the wife.

“I sure did. And they were nice folks, too. Karl Berg sure could play that autoharp.”

“I didn’t know his wife still let him,” added Mr. Markiv.

“You met his wife, too?” asked Mrs. Markiv.

“Sure did. She fed me all afternoon on coffee and cookies, and every time Karl tried to play anything but a slow hymn, she’d interfere. In fact, she told me right as soon as I asked about the autoharp, it was laying on the sofa, that he didn’t play anything but religious music.”

The woman was now smiling broadly. “And I suppose she told you about her son, too,” she said.

All five of them started to titter.

“What’s so funny about that?” I asked. “What a horrible tragedy.” I was beginning to think that maybe the Markivs weren’t such nice folks, after all.

“And what story did she tell you?” inquired the missus.

I then summarized the tale of what happened last year at the airport.

“So why is that so darned funny?” I asked. “I think it’s perfectly horrible.”

“Well,” said Mr. Markiv. “I suppose it’s not really all that funny. Now, you’re a stranger around here, and you never heard any of this before, so I can see why you don’t see the humor in it. Folks who’ve lived here all their lives, they know the Bergs, and they know what Mrs. Berg’s like. She really is a sad case. It was a long time ago, back in the forties, when their son died in a mail-plane crash. She never could get over it, though. Has been saying it happened last year for the past thirty years or more. And her stories of what happened! I don’t how many different ones she’s got. You went back there tomorrow, you’d hear a different one, maybe even more outlandish. Cut in half by the prop, eh? That’s one of the more believable ones. She must’ve thought you were too smart for some of the other tales she tells.”

As I drove back to the motel, I thought, “No, it still wasn’t funny, although I suppose if I lived next door and heard different tale after different tale, year in, year out, I might start to laugh at it all, too.” After all, humor comes pretty close to tragedy. But I couldn’t help thinking about Karl Berg and how much better his life would have been if Jane had just let him get over it.

Historical Sign
*(marking for passersby
an abandoned plantation house
in the Mississippi Delta)*

1.

Once overworked by black men,
this plantation is no longer
overseen by white men, it is
overlooked by everyone:

drivers, when they venture
from the interstate, race
by this plantation house
on their way to Stuckey's—

yet, distracted by
their stomachs, they
don't notice the fading
historical sign. . .

2.

Whatever the State may say,
these columns are not Greek,
these are the flagpoles
of a forgotten nation—

a nation that surrendered
its offensive flag
to save its estates
from reconstruction. . .

3.

They loved their institution,
those who owned this place,
while those who worked here
hurt too much to hate it,
so this plantation survived
the changing of the laws
without changing, the house
and shacks whitewashed

to mask the War's wounds.
But one man couldn't keep it
up—he lost his crop to weevils,
then the sun deserted him;

his pride mixed with whiskey,
he charged down the road
past enemy shadows, to the river,
where he slept, waiting for the day:

when first light flooded the fields
his wife woke up alone—he and his Bible
were gone; she prayed, then saw a sign
God was on the land: his overturned boat. . .

4.

The sign does not say so, yet
this plantation, once overworked
by blacks and overseen by whites,
still is understood by no one. . .

Margaret Yocom

Opening Camp

Even the moon is hidden by the mountain
tonight. Lilacs are still ten dreams away.

The key in my hand turns the silted lock.
Whose knife and spoon? Whose pen? Whose empty plate?

You are here. You will always be here.
Repeat these lines thirty times. Every day.

January, February, March. I breathe ice.
In the museum of cold, one glove is on display.

I gave away my field guide to the hours.
Tell me, does the cedar grow by the lake?

Everything I thought I wanted lies frozen
in this alabaster air. Come soon. Stay.

Echo, at Lakeside

small waves
at twilight

the drowsy call of bird
to bird

open windows
at morning's blue hour

all day
your voice

Where the Living Keep Watch

*If the hand, if
the eyelid, if the one—*

Rain squalls out of the northwest, streaks
this small pocket of lake silver
then gray, then silver

Waves lash new-risen water lilies that
float, sink and float, anchored
by this season's roots

*if the one last dream of
if—*

Fog claims the cove, moves
ashore for one white pine, then another
a continent away, death enters a room

if the breath—

A flutter in the air, traces
of lavender and wood smoke
the door

Beyond pine
beyond spruce, fir, the chime of a fresh-again brook
a Saturday mower begins his evensong

In Jewelweed

The humming
bird hovers at my feeder, sips
 the offered syrup
 again
 and again
I wheel and dip in your certain sweetness
 flutter of fingers on silk, open
 palm feathering open
 palm, she

 lingers in jewelweed green
dancer in foxglove, she, whirling
 still in flowering quince, she
 again
 and again
lapped in honey
 lingers, yes
 until limb to trembling

limb, we
 drift beyond winds
 beyond meadows
 of blue

 in the loose-limbed pines
small shadows whirl again
 and oh—
 again

William Bernard McCarthy

Second Growth

Autumn may be months away
but this is a fine day
to survey
a new hunting spot.

The hunter knows
that this is no forest primeval.
Here once a man came
with farm in mind
to clear and till,
to harvest and build.
Here a woman followed,
with home in mind,
to garden
and bear
and cherish.

But they are gone now,
gone man and wife,
gone children,
gone crops and buildings,
the farm abandoned
or sold
in a time of depression
or family grief.

Over years
old-field flowers
gave way to saplings,
and so the forest reclaimed
what it had never entirely
abandoned.

He admires the oak,
the beech with grey bark,
the lobed leaves and red stems of the maple,
and off to the left,
that promising rustle,
it might be deer or turkey.

And so he tips his hat
to the northern hardwood forest
whose triumph here
seems complete.

Seems
until
he comes
upon
an impenetrable acre
where all the underbrush
is roses.

Percy

Percy and I are about the same age. When I came to live on the island in the early 1970s, Percy was doing a little bit of blacksmithing but his main work was welding. I had acquired some older farm machinery at auction, plowshares that needed new points, so I soon made his acquaintance. With his bushy blond hair and full beard streaked with premature gray, his sinewy arms, broad shoulders, and powerful trunk, he certainly looked like a rural blacksmith to me, and I was happy to have found him to facilitate my adventures with a tractor. He knew, also, where there was likely to be abandoned farm machinery on the island, too far gone to use, yet with a piece or two that would, with a little adaptation, repair the hay baler or whatever else I had brought him.

Of course, there weren't many people on the island using farm machinery anymore, and Percy made most of his living repairing the steel fishing gear used by the scallop draggers and lobster boats and other vessels that were based here. Some mornings when I'd drop by, Percy would have some huge, octopus-like, steel contrivance laying on the cement floor of his shop awaiting his welder's torch, though at the moment I entered, he would often as not be discoursing about some local news or gossip with one of the island fishermen, the putative owner of the contraption lying on the floor in need of repair, their coastal accents thick and impenetrable as the ocean fog.

One day I came upon an ancient and broken five-string banjo at the monthly auction I frequented for farm machinery and other amusements. I had learned to strum a guitar and in moments of boredom had learned to do more than strum it; one thing led to another and for a while I had thought it would be nice to learn to play the banjo once I could afford one. Casting my gaze on the banjo at the auction, I saw the name "Fairbanks" stamped into the wooden dowel stick, and noticed that the metal rim that once had held the now-ripped skin over the head had sprung apart at the joint. The rest of the instrument looked healthy enough. If Percy could fix the rim, I would put the rest of it back together, and learn to play it. I won it for five dollars and the next day brought it over to Percy.

For some reason I left the banjo in my truck when I went in to see him. I can't remember why. Maybe I wanted to visit for a while and gradually bring the conversation around to the banjo. Or maybe he had been working on something I

had brought him, and my checking where he was at on it would have been the first order of business. It was long ago, and I don't remember just why I didn't pick the banjo up and bring it in with me, but I didn't.

Percy's shop was a nondescript, battleship gray, metal-clad storage building set back from the road, with few windows and with areas of bright lights and darkness inside. He liked country music and had his radio on whenever he worked; when no one was around he sang along, or so his wife told me. He dressed in brown, polyester-blend work clothes that his wife bought for him from the Sears catalog.

When I went inside and after we talked for a while—this time there was no one in there but Percy and me—I said I had a question for him, whether he could possibly fix something for me that I guessed he'd not ever tried before.

"It's a banjo," I said. He furrowed his brow. "The thing has a metal rim," I continued. "I suppose it must be steel, shaped like a ring, chromeplated, or what I mean is that it should be shaped in a circle, but the things come apart, and I thought maybe you could weld it back together."

Percy had a blank look on his face. I was getting nowhere, I could see. I started moving my hands in the air to outline an imaginary banjo, and then I touched the tips of my thumbs and first fingers together so that they made a circle. "See, that's the rim," I said. Then I pulled my fingertips apart. "But it's broken off. Can you fix it?" I was getting the feeling that the more I explained, the less he understood.

"Musical banjo?" he said at last.

"Yes, a musical banjo," I said, relieved.

"Let's have a look at her."

I fairly ran out to get it, and when I brought it inside, I took it out of its case and showed him what I was talking about.

"I don't know," he said. "I don't know if the weld'll take." He paused. "And it won't look pretty."

"That's all right. It just needs to be smooth on the inside at the joint so it doesn't rip the skin as it pulls it down tight over the head."

"Well, if you want me to try it, I'll try. I'm not sure it'll take, and I'm not sure how strong I could get it even if it does take."

"I'd like you to try, yes. Getting a replacement rim would be just about impossible." The truth is that I could probably have bought a new rim from a banjo-manufacturing company, though getting it the exact size might have been troublesome; but I didn't know any of that then. Besides, I wanted to see if Percy would rise to the occasion.

I needn't have worried. Percy said he was backed up some, and it would take him a week to get to it, if that would be all right. I said it would be, and when I went back ten days later, I wasn't surprised to find that he had done a perfect and strong weld. The rim fit back down on the head smoothly, and the banjo was on its way to becoming whole again. That's the sort of person Percy was: modest, yet clever with tools.

There had always been a small artist colony on the island, painters mostly and a few sculptors, as the light was said to be very special for painting and famous artists like Winslow Homer had completed some of their best work hereabouts. But in the 1970s more painters moved to the island, along with a number of potters, silversmiths, jewelry makers, and photographers, and it wasn't long before galleries sprang up featuring the new artists while potters sold their wares out of their shops, sometimes encouraging people to watch them at work. The art colony's presence attracted more tourists, and then more artists, although not all the artists stayed, as the island was remote and the winters difficult. Among this influx of artists was a blacksmith, John Leverett.

Leverett piqued Percy's curiosity. Unlike Percy, who had learned blacksmithing from one of his great uncles who had practiced the trade on the island, this transplanted blacksmith had gone to a crafts school and then apprenticed to a blacksmith in Virginia near Colonial Williamsburg, who specialized in doing decorative ironwork, such as fences and gates, as well as elaborate hinges, door latches, candle stands, and fireplace tools. When he got good at it, Leverett was employed by Colonial Williamsburg, demonstrating blacksmithing for the tourists. Percy's blacksmithing had revolved around rougher stuff, for farm work, and not much of that; there wasn't enough demand to make a living at blacksmithing, and so although he once confessed to me that he preferred it, he spent most of his working time welding.

Percy was dumbfounded to think that Leverett could make a go of it with fancy work. Who would buy it? And yet it seemed as if Leverett had a clientele; Percy told me that on those occasions when he visited him—just out of curiosity, he said—Leverett seemed to be working on a piece for someone who had ordered it. The island historical society had commissioned a fence with an elaborate gate to surround their newly restored eighteenth-century house, which they were planning to open to the public one day a week, and Leverett had said that would keep him busy for half a year. Percy had never built an iron fence or gate, and never even contemplated it until now. Leverett, whose hair was tied back in a small ponytail, always was elaborately courteous to Percy, for reasons that Percy couldn't quite fathom.

Percy appreciated the older ways of life on the island, whether it was clamming or salting fish or making cider or tipping balsam trees for weaving Christmas wreathes, a seasonal industry around here. His brother-in-law loved old boats, not the wooden sailboats favored by the summer residents but the old motorboats, especially the Chris-Crafts from before World War II with their powerful engines that could make more than 30 knots per hour, their double-planked mahogany hulls, and their polished brass deck hardware; in their spare time they fooled around restoring them. The two of them also liked to race the old Saab three-bangers on the ice of Sims Pond, once the leaf peepers all had gone and the pond had frozen over. Every February they took a two-week vacation together with some other island men, heading far northwest to set up their ice-fishing shacks, where they dropped their lines, drank whiskey, told lies, and came back with loads of salmon. But Percy wasn't nostalgic for the old days, nor did he have a romantic view of life

back then. If modern technology was good, he wanted to take advantage of it. He filled his shop with the best power tools he could afford. In his welding, he sought the most efficient ways of working. At the same time, he always was ready to interrupt work and chat when someone came by to pick up or drop off something.

Leverett was not well-liked by the others in the artist colony, which, after all, was not a colony but a random collection of artists who had simply landed here. Possibly, it was a case of resentment, as he seemed to be earning a lot of money. Leverett and his wife had two school-age children in boarding schools—not the kind of thing the local artists could afford. Just as likely it was Leverett's politics—like many of his clients, he had supported the war in Vietnam. Whatever the cause, the artists who knew Percy wished that he could ease Leverett out of the lucrative blacksmithing commissions from the wealthy summer people, for we all knew he harbored a desire to do more of it.

It wasn't lack of talent that was holding Percy back but lack of knowledge; and besides, the summer people just didn't think of him as a blacksmith, if they knew him at all. He didn't know how to sell himself, or he didn't care. Leverett's workplace was made to look like an old-fashioned blacksmith's shop, set picturesquely next to a stream, water from which he used to cool the iron. Ironwork was hanging from ceilings and walls and was displayed in a section of his shop—latches and hinges, fireplace tools and andirons and cranes, sconces and bridge lamps, iron fernery and trivets—giving his clientele ideas as to what they might buy from him. He also had an area in his shop cordoned off with a rope where visitors could stand and watch him at work. He wore a blacksmith's apron, rolled up his sleeves, and talked in a voice that ranged from a stage whisper to a booming oratory, as if he regularly engaged in debates with Daniel Webster.

One fall day I was sitting in the shop of one of my potter friends. She said she'd heard about a crafts school down in Portland where a person could spend a month either in the summertime or all January and that they taught blacksmithing there. The school was somehow affiliated with Old Sturbridge Village, the living history museum in western Massachusetts, and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. It had a good reputation, even though it'd been in existence for only a few years. She said she'd been talking with some other island artists, and they'd agreed that it'd be good if Percy went to that school. He'd learn to do the kinds of things Leverett was doing, or at least get a good start on it.

"How's he going to pay for it?" I asked.

"That's the great thing about it. They have scholarships for people who can't afford the tuition. Not everybody gets in. You have to show a portfolio. Percy would be perfect for them. He could learn the kind of blacksmithing that he wants to do and rub elbows with the kind of people who are doing it. They'd adopt him."

"Like a pet? I don't think so."

"What I mean is, half of selling a work of art to the summer folk or the tourists around here involves reassuring them that it's quality, something they'd be proud to

own because it says something about them, their taste, their discernment. I mean, how do you really evaluate a modern painting? You can't judge by whether the lighthouse in the painting looks like a real lighthouse, not any more, not when the painter is trying to show the inner lighthouse, the spirit of the lighthouse, instead of just the outer resemblance."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Lots of folks still judge by resemblance. Percy does, for one. He has seascapes hung on the walls of his house and paintings of birds on branches, all realistic. Once he showed me a canvas he'd found in the dump. Abstract art. You couldn't tell what it was supposed to be. 'Reckon this is right side up?' he asked me, and then he turned it upside-down and said he didn't know. Did I? And he knew I wouldn't know either. And I didn't. He laughed at it and said no wonder the painter had left it at the dump."

"But that's my point. Today's consumer of art, and they are consumers, after all, needs confidence. A bowl's not just a bowl any more; it has to have philosophy behind it. I mean, really, why should you spend five dollars for a handmade bowl when you can buy ten machine-made ones for the same five bucks at a department store? So Percy needs to learn how to reassure the summer folks and tourists that they're making the right choice, doing the right thing by buying his door latch and putting it on their back door, when they could spend one-tenth that for a door latch in Grainger's Hardware. He needs to learn to talk their language."

"Well, maybe he could."

"You know him better than any of us," said the potter. "Why don't you talk to him about it? I sent away for some brochures. They came the other day in the mail. Why don't you leave one with him so he can think about it?"

"All right," I said. "I'll do it."

A few days later, I broached the subject with Percy. He gave me an opening when the talk turned to blacksmithing, and he said an old fisherman had brought him a couple of buggy wheels to set. The fisherman wanted to have the buggy ready for Easter, and he knew to give Percy plenty of time. The spokes had gotten loose, and the fisherman had tightened them up last summer by soaking them in a pond; but in the fall, they had worked loose again and needed straightening and resetting. Percy kept an old wagon himself, but it was in disrepair—a project.

I told Percy as much as I knew about the crafts school down in Portland and asked him if he thought he'd like to try it. I handed him the brochure.

"I don't know," he said. "It would mean leaving the island for a month. I don't know how my wife would feel about that. I'd have to talk it over with her."

"Sure," I said.

"You ever been to a school like this?" He looked over the brochure. Many of the people pictured in it were thin and had long hair.

"No, never. But I've heard you talk about how you wished you could do some of that fancy blacksmithing Leverett does, and I guess this could be your chance to learn some of it."

“How much would it cost?”

“Nothing, if you can get a scholarship. You’d have to write up a little bit about your life and send it to them, tell them who you are and how you got into blacksmithing and welding and what you want to do, and that sort of thing.”

“I’m not a writer.”

“Well,” I said, “I can help you. You could just say it to me, and I’d write it down the way it should be, and then you could send it in and see what happened.”

“Let me talk to my wife about this,” said Percy.

After Percy had gotten his wife to agree that he could go in January, as there wasn’t much work he’d miss then anyway, we set a time for me to come by and extract his biography. But before I did that I wanted to learn what the crafts school expected, so I phoned their Portland number. The receptionist referred me to a Boston number, where I spoke with the director of admissions, a professor at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. He understood the situation at once, interrupting me as I was going on and on about Percy.

“No,” he said, “we haven’t had anyone like Percy at the crafts school in Portland. Most of our students are from what I would call the, ah, artistic bourgeoisie, if that’s not an oxymoron. They’re good artists, but they’re doing this as a pastime, filling a hole in their lives. They talk of moving down east and setting up a gallery, but, between you and me, they love Boston, or Portland, too much. And as I say, this is for balance. Of course, we do get applications from career artists, those who’ve made the full commitment, you know, and this is the kind of person who gets our scholarships. Now, Percy, would you say he’s working class?”

“Absolutely, an island native to the core. Worked all his life, as far as I know. Doesn’t own a sailboat. He learned a little forging from his great-uncle, one of the older blacksmiths on the island. They’re all gone, now. But it was the kind of forge work a person did for farmers, and today there’s hardly any call for it. Then another blacksmith moved to the island, doing fancy work, you know, for the summer people, and Percy wants to get into that, but he doesn’t really know how.”

“Does he have what it takes? I mean, is he talented? Can he send us photos of his work, a portfolio?”

“Well, that’s just it. He doesn’t have one, unless you want a photo of a plowshare with a new point or a wagon wheel. But he’s clever. He welded a banjo rim back together for me once, and he works with his brother-in-law restoring old Chris-Crafts.”

“Oh, those Chris-Crafts. We had one when I was a boy. Nothing finer for cruising. They’ll pull a water-skier, too. My, my, the Model T of motorboats. Well, Percy sounds like a diamond in the rough. He sounds like the real thing. It’s not every day someone like him comes our way. I’ll talk to the board, and I’m pretty sure we’ll offer him a scholarship.”

“That’s great,” I said. “I’ll help him with the application.”

“Don’t tell him it’s a sure thing, though. It’s not. We still have to see his work.”

I learned a few more things about Percy when he was telling me about his life so that I could help him with the application. His grandfather had been a sailor and had eventually captained one of the yachts that had cruised out of the island harbor every summer with wealthy “rusticators” on board from Boston and New York. His father had left the island as a young man to work in a paper mill, and it was then that Percy was born. I had been wrong about his being an island native, but he may as well have been, as his family went back several generations here, and it was more or less by accident that he was born off-island. When Percy was a young boy his father got fed up with millwork and hired himself out as a guide for the “sports,” or sportsmen who came to hunt and fish in the north woods. His father had taken young Percy along on some of these trips, and Percy became a good fly fisherman, something he still did when he had a chance. He didn’t care for hunting and hated the thought of killing animals. When Percy was about halfway through high school his father was killed in a boating accident, and so Percy and his mother moved back to the island, living with his mother’s parents. It was her father who taught Percy welding and blacksmithing, and he gradually took over the business. He regretted not graduating from high school, but he liked to read books and said he liked that kind of education better because he could set his own curriculum. I took down what I thought would be necessary for the application biography and helped Percy fill out the rest of the form. By the time we were done, he was convinced that he should go.

Around Christmas, Percy began to get cold feet. He’d been accepted by the crafts school and given a full scholarship, but he had been thinking about what life would be like there, living in a college dormitory while the students were on their January break, eating at a college dining hall and, hardest of all, trying to figure out how he could fit in. He phoned me about a week before his wife was supposed to drive him down to Portland. It was unusual for him to call me. He wanted me to stop by and talk with him about what I thought it would be like, to prepare him. I’d lived in the city; I was his friend and could give him some tips on how to fit in, he thought.

He greeted me at the door of his house and invited me in. His house was small and neat. Books on wild birds and animals filled a bookcase. There were some books on blacksmithing, as well. The framed prints of seascapes and birds were on the walls.

“What about clothes at the school? I’m all out of string ties, you know?” He was referring to Leverett, who wore one as a part of his costume for the public. Well, Leverett had done time at Colonial Williamsburg, where he might have had to dress this way, and I’d guessed he was just used to it.

“Oh, that’s just Leverett’s outfit. I’m sure the students at the crafts school dress casually. Shirts and jeans, and maybe overalls. And workboots, just like you. Do you have any jeans?” I remembered that Percy wore those Sears polyester work clothes, and he didn’t encourage people to watch him when he worked. In fact, he

preferred to work alone. When he had a shop visitor, he talked to him until the visitor left. Not long after meeting Percy I realized that my blue denim work shirt and Levis were a poor imitation of contemporary working-class garb, so I decided in the name of authenticity to buy one of those polyester uniforms; but I found it uncomfortable to wear it, so I went back to my original costume.

"Yeah, I've got some jeans, and even an L.L. Bean chamois shirt. Reckon I'll bring my blacksmith's apron."

"Perfect," I said. "What else?"

"Well, what about the food?"

"Let's see, a college dining room, that'll be mystery meat, lots of potatoes, green beans." I remembered my own college fare with distaste, but I imagined Percy would like it all right. "It's kind of the institutional version of home cooking," I said.

"Institutional? You mean like a hospital, a prison?"

"Oh, better than that! And you're in Portland. You can always go out to eat."

"Well, I don't know. What do we do in the evening?" Percy liked to watch nature programs on educational television.

"I'm sure there'll be TVs there for you. They also have lectures and presentations on the various crafts being taught, and at the end, you get to show your work that you've done there and talk about it. And there'll be time for gabbing with the other folks, I'm sure."

"Whatever will I say to them?" Percy replied.

"Oh, just be yourself. They'll love you there. I'm sure you'll be all right."

A few days later Percy's wife drove him to Portland. He had taken a few pairs of jeans, flannel and chamois shirts, and overalls, she said, and a tin of his favorite brownies that she'd baked for him. She was looking forward to spending more time with her girlfriends, she added, saying that in some ways it'd be like a vacation for both of them. He'd promised he'd phone her every night.

My potter friend had followed the whole story and was relaying the events to the island artists in her circle. A few days after New Year's Day, with Percy safely ensconced in Portland, she asked me to come by on my way back from the bank. She was in her shop, making the utilitarian bowls she sold by the hundreds in the summertime.

"Well, what do you think about Percy? Is he going to come back here and ease Leverett off this island?"

"Oh, I guess so. Who knows? But Percy's wanted to learn this stuff, and now he's doing it. His wife said he misses her more than she misses him!"

"Well, it's understandable, with all those strangers there, and he's in a strange place. She's still at home. Anyway, I just hope he's also learning how to be with these people. You know, we get business from tourists, painters sometimes buy from each other. Blacksmiths, I don't know. I guess there aren't too many of them."

"One too many for this island," I said.

"I suppose so. Will he be changed when he comes back? I can see him now, he'll have to build a new place, made to look like an old blacksmith's shop."

"I don't think so," I said to my friend. "He'll find one of those old abandoned fisherman shacks on the island, and he'll move it onto his property. You know some of those buildings are pretty old."

"Yeah, move it by boat. Perfect! And then make it into a blacksmith shop. Oh, it's so perfect. He'll putter around in that shop and the summer people will flock to him. 'Oh, Mr. Percy, would you make me one of those nice candle stands you made for Mrs. Gunther?' Leverett won't have a chance. Percy's the real thing. That's it, you see."

I smiled at the thought of Percy driving Leverett off the island. He wouldn't mean to. He didn't have a mean bone in his body, Percy. But it would happen anyway. Leverett could do his blacksmithing anywhere. Maybe he'd move on to Old Sturbridge Village, or go back to Colonial Williamsburg.

At the end of January Percy returned to the island. I expected him to invite me over to tell me all about his experiences, but he didn't. Probably too busy retooling for blacksmithing, I figured. He'd call me up when he was ready and had something to show. I knew better than to think he'd thank me. But a month went by, and he didn't phone. I saw his wife at the grocery store and asked about him. "Percy, he didn't feel well after coming back from Portland, but he's all right now. He said the food didn't agree with him."

"I was kind of hoping he'd get in touch and tell me how it went and what he learned, and what his plans were."

"Well, I don't know much about that myself. He's been keeping to himself. Of course, he wasn't feeling well. Why don't you come on over and cheer him up?"

I dropped by his shop the next Saturday. Percy was dressed up in his Sears polyester, welding on a heavy chain attached to an anchor. "I heard you weren't feeling so well," I began.

"Food down in Portland didn't agree with me," he said. "I was feeling poorly for a couple of weeks after I got back. No energy at all."

"It was that college food, then? Not as good as home cooking?"

"Not so good, no. Plus they had a lot of funny food, like yogurt and goat's milk and bean sprouts. And something they called rice cakes, but there weren't any cake in them."

"Oh, that's just hippie food," I said. "The artists around here eat a lot of it, too. Next thing you'll tell me they made their own bread."

"Well, they did. A bunch of them got together every few days and pounded dough. I couldn't believe it. My grandmother made bread every day of her life till she could get it at the grocery store. Soon's she didn't have to make it, she stopped."

"Was it any good?"

"Not too bad, except when they put those funny seeds in it."

“Did you go out to eat, then?”

“I didn’t want to spend any extra money that I didn’t have, but after a couple of weeks some of us got pretty tired of the food, so we decided to go out. I wanted to go to an Italian restaurant, but they chose a French one. I didn’t think we’d ever get our food. Must have had about ten courses, little bits of food on the plate, and soup in a teacup. I had to have the menu translated.”

“Huh. Did you like it?”

“The waiter in the white suit came by, they had two waiters, one in a black suit and another in white, and asked us if we wanted any wine. I was bold. ‘I’ll have the red,’ I told him. He gave me a menu with a list of the names of the wines they had. They must have had a hundred different kinds, and I was supposed to tell him which one I wanted, except they were in French, and I couldn’t read what they were, and even if I could have read it there was no way I could pronounce it.”

He laughed a little and went on:

“Then one of the men who came along with us, he was doing glass blowing, he asked, ‘Do you have a house red?’ and the man in the white suit said, ‘Yes,’ and then something I couldn’t make out. I guess it was the name of the wine, and the glass blower said he thought that’s what I would like. Then the rest of them passed that wine menu around and looked it over real close like it was a prop’ty survey, and then they talked it out with the man in the white suit and ordered a few bottles. I couldn’t follow half of what they were saying. This one had a nose, that one tasted like leather.”

I shook my head. “Wine snobs,” I said. “Were there any others doing blacksmithing besides you?”

“A few, yes. One was from Massachusetts. He’d lived in Boston and did farrier work mostly, shoeing horses, you know. But he’d moved out to the country in the western part of the state, he said, and he thought he could do better at decorative work.” Percy sighed. “That remains to be seen,” he said.

I’d wanted to ask him whether he’d learned enough so that he could start in on some of that decorative work himself, but he seemed so tired that I hesitated in pursuing it. I was standing there thinking what to say next, when he spoke to me again.

“You know, it was just a different class of people.”

I nodded. That was it. I might have known, should have known. But I thought I had left all that behind when I moved to the island. I wanted to leave it behind, so I was blind to it. But why did Percy and I get along, then? I had always interacted with Percy on his turf, on his terms. We didn’t talk about my ex-law practice or why I gave it up to move to this island. We never went to a restaurant together—though if we did, it would be to a place without a wine list, I was certain.

“So, did you get some good instruction on your blacksmithing, anyway?”

“Some, yes. I reckon I could do some better now if I put my mind to it. Is there something you’d like me to make for you?”

“Not really,” I said. “But I’ll think of something,” and at that moment I was sure I would. I’m sorry to report I never did. If Percy had made me a door latch or a

candlestick as a present, I'd have gladly accepted it, but he didn't. Nor did he redesign his shop, or get rid of his metal shed and replace it with an old wooden building tricked out to look like something out of Old Sturbridge Village. He kept his radio tuned to the country station and wore his polyesters. He welded for a living five days a week including Saturdays, but he did make one change: on Wednesdays he fired up his forge and labored on some unusual pieces—seals, fishes, and something big that he called the Loch Ness Monster. He was trying to get the seals to look like seals, the fish to resemble salmon, and the Loch Ness Monster—well, who knows what that was supposed to look like? His had some dragon in it, but it also had some walrus and maybe even rhinoceros. It was a monster, all right.

When I asked him if once he got the hang of it he was going to forge a bunch of iron seals and salmon and sell them to the tourists that summer, he said, no, he just thought he'd try doing iron sculpture, make a few good ones if he could. It was kind of a challenge, he said, to get a sculpture to look the way it should. You had to get it right from all angles, even the bottom. Sculpture wasn't easy like a hinge or a door latch or a pattern like a rosette on a candle holder. It wasn't even useful. It would take him awhile but he might work up to a merganser or a mallard. He had decided he wasn't interested in doing decorative blacksmith work for tourists or summer people after all; he wanted to do iron sculpture. It was just, well, he had gotten the shapes in his head somehow, and he wanted to try it to see what he could do with it. He was curious to see if he could bring it off. He didn't care whether the summer people liked it or not. It wasn't for them, anyway.

from *Bigfoot Stole My Husband*

Chapter One

Henriette Stiller flipped a garden burger on her hibachi. To her left, her husband, Robert Larrabee, laughed with his Bigfoot-hunting friends. To her right, the other Bigfoot wives cooked hamburgers and yelled at their kids whenever one strayed toward the enemy camp. Directly across the lawn, some thirty yards in front of her, camouflage-clad men stumbled in and out of Cray's trailer. Henriette was backed up against her old camper, just a charred garden burger separating her from the Bigfoot world.

She wished they'd leave the sasquatches alone.

This was only Henriette's second year at the Sasquatch Fest. Some of these men had dragged their wives to the Bigfoot Crossing Trailer Park in Johnson, Washington, for fifteen years now. Her own husband hadn't missed a year yet.

"Those guys are going to get hurt," said Lenny, a balding chiropractor, as he watched Cray's trailer. "They'll shoot each other before the weekend's through."

"Nah, they're just having a good time. In their way," said Robert.

"I hear Cray almost shot an animal control officer," Lenny said. "Came 'round to check on the cats and dogs here. Notice how they all have open sores? Cray thought it was the government come to take his guns away! Almost shot him." Lenny shook his head, bald spot wagging beneath the setting sun, video camera dangling from one hand. For once, he wasn't filming.

"Cray was a good Bigfoot man," Robert said. "Just needs to lay off the booze."

"You've been playing peacemaker for years. But face it, Robert. Those guys are psychopaths!"

Henriette leaned against the camper, listening to the men, staring over the line of trailers, past the brick restrooms, up to the pine-thick mountains. If she closed her left eye she could see solid green, unmarred by the brown expanse of a clearcut.

"Henriette!" Lenny laughed. "What are you doing to that garden burger?"

Smoke streamed from the blackened underside of the non-meat patty. She watched it burn, then looked at the women on her right, who managed to keep track of ten burgers and hot dogs and half that many kids, as they made cole slaw and unloaded ketchup, mustard, and relish from coolers packed with ice.

Lenny rushed over, his video camera aimed at the grill, and snatched the burning patty with his free hand. “The fire department would’ve come in another minute,” he said. He wiped his hand on his jeans and pointed the camera at Henriette. “Look alive for the camera. Now let us in on your cooking secrets.”

She pulled the box of garden burgers from a paper sack. They were supposed to be kept frozen, but had fully thawed hours ago. “Well, you take them out of the box”—she held a garden burger up for the camera, then dropped it on the grill—“and cook it until it’s black.”

They both laughed, but she felt a little cranky. She wished for a quiet night in the woods, just her and Robert, without all these people.

Henriette watched as Lenny turned the camera toward her husband. He was a tall man with a weatherbeaten face, sharp blue eyes, and sandy blond hair. A good, kind man whose passion for sasquatches had been endearing at first.

If he wanted to see sasquatches, she thought they should get a cabin in the woods. If he became as much a part of nature as trees, squirrels, and dirt, the sasquatches would grow accustomed to him. They wouldn’t hide.

The Native Americans saw sasquatches all the time.

Unfortunately, Robert, like most of his peers, was skeptical of Native American stories. But honey, he’d say, they think thunderbirds are real.

After they married, she realized that Robert wouldn’t be satisfied simply by seeing a sasquatch. After fifteen years of searching, he wanted to capture sasquatches on film and be interviewed by *Discover* and *National Geographic* and probably do the daytime talk show circuit. And instead of waiting patiently in the woods, Robert waited at home for other people to see a sasquatch, then raced to the area weighed down with cameras, night vision gear and measuring devices. This was the favored method among his colleagues, which was why they never saw one. And why they were so jealous of the Native Americans, who not only had the requisite patience and respect to not chase the sasquatches but could forego recognition and fame.

The new evidence promised this weekend would seal the sasquatches’ doom. She tried not to think about it yet.

“Henriette!” Lenny cried, bounding over again to stare in amazement at more burnt garden burgers. “I thought you were joking about that blackening technique.”

She glanced down at the grill. “Not much of a cook, I guess,” she sighed. She snatched her purse off the grass and headed for the vending machines, leaving Lenny to deal with the burning burgers.

She passed a group of trailer park residents, males in their late teens and early 20s, who sat around a picnic table passing a joint. They stared at her, making her acutely aware of her appearance. She wore a faded denim miniskirt, a blue tank top, and black flip-flops. Her toenails were painted red, her short fingernails neglected. She tanned easily, and her arms and legs were brown, but her face was much paler from the sun block she wore to protect against wrinkles. She was on the small side,

five-foot-four, size seven, and looked younger than her thirty-two years.

She stared back at the trailer park boys, idly trying out each in her mind. None fit.

At the vending machine, she bought a dinner of toasted peanut butter crackers and granola bars.

She heard footsteps behind her and turned to see Jake and Kirby, two of Cray's faction whom she knew by sight. Jake looked like he was in his early forties, maybe just a couple of years older than Robert. He was dark and might have been handsome if his face wasn't puffy and dotted with stubble. But Kirby, his younger sidekick, had hard features and icy blue eyes that stared into Henriette. Both men wore tattered camouflage pants. Jake wore a black T-shirt, and Kirby wore a heavy plaid jacket, despite the warm evening. A small gold crucifix hung around Kirby's neck.

Jake pulled a roll of quarters from his pants pocket. "Would you like a Coke?" he asked Henriette as he stood before the drink machine.

"OK," Henriette said.

Jake unrolled two quarters, stuck them in the machine, pushed a button, and handed Henriette a Coke.

"Thanks," she said. Silence. "So what are you guys doing in that trailer?"

Jake looked down at the gum-studded patch of concrete they stood on. "Just watching a movie," he said.

"Come on, Jake. Buy your drink and let's go," Kirby ordered. He fixed his cool stare on Henriette, who forced herself to look back evenly.

"See you," Henriette said, walking away before they could walk away from her.

As far as Henriette knew, none of the camouflage-clad men had talked to anyone from Robert's side, except her, for twenty-one years. Not since 1974, the year everyone was certain they were on the verge of finding a sasquatch, and debate raged over the ethics of shooting the creature. The three big names in Bigfoot hunting back then—Max Vaughn, Elmer Gribb, and Cray, whose first name had long since been discarded and forgotten—split that year. Max Vaughn, Robert's mentor, was a reformed hunter who said a good film would be proof enough. Hoary old professor Gribb, already the butt of his university colleagues' jokes, fervently believed that shooting was justified. After all, he said, the 1967 Patterson film was the best photographic evidence of the sasquatch to date, and only people who hung on every word of TV talk shows seemed to accept it as proof. Gribb and Cray had continued to work together, but Cray was badly damaged by alcohol and posed more of a threat to his fellow trailer park residents than to sasquatches.

Henriette held Gribb responsible for that faction. That Gribb would slaughter a rare animal just to boost his reputation qualified him as the most selfish person Henriette had ever met.

Henriette was not in a hurry to return to her husband's side. Halfway between the vending machines and her own encampment, she sat on a picnic table and peeled the plastic off the peanut butter crackers. She nibbled them, watching the strip of bright orange above the mountains, leftovers of the sun. This time of year made her want to swim naked in rivers, climb barefoot over rocks, fuck

in the forest. She took off her flip-flops and stretched her toes. She was so tired of being inside her classroom, teaching English to eager foreigners, bored foreigners, scared foreigners. She wished the woods could last and Monday would never come.

The trailer dwellers emerged from their trailers, dinner over, to sit in lawn chairs and digest. There was probably no prettier place to park a trailer, she thought, turning to see the dark mountains and trees that circled the place.

A van turned off the road and started down the gravel driveway leading to the trailer park. Both sides of the van were painted with pictures of sasquatches, and in the driver's seat sat Max, the most famous Bigfoot hunter of all. He was also the only Bigfoot hunter who regularly appeared in Henriette's fantasies. She watched him now, torn. He had the evidence to bring about the fall of all sasquatches. By the end of the weekend, his name would be a household word.

Hunters from both camps watched as Max strode from the van. His confidence was visible from 100 feet away. He wore his usual safari hat and snakeskin belt, made from a snake he'd caught and skinned in his native Australia. Although Henriette was a vegetarian, she got excited when she pictured a younger Max tracking and capturing snakes for a living, killing them for their skins, and catching them live for zoos. He was the epitome of competence. Henriette believed there was no problem that would stump Max.

Robert was fairly able. He could probably survive a winter in the woods, or maybe a month of winter, after which he'd emerge from the forest, emaciated and trembling. Henriette would have to stay home from work and care for him.

Max would stride out of the forest in spring, healthier than ever, bearing a bouquet of wildflowers for Henriette and months of pent up lust.

Max was a genius. He'd managed to get his Bigfoot research funded by some thoroughly reputable scientific foundation out of Albuquerque. The foundation paid him a salary, provided the van and access to helicopters.

The light had nearly left the sky when Henriette slipped off the picnic table and walked barefoot toward Robert, Max, and the other men. The women were in the restroom, doing dinner dishes, or in their tents, trying to make their kids go to sleep.

Max's followers gathered around him as he stood dignified but unshaven beside the charred remnants of garden burgers on Henriette's hibachi.

"What do you got, Max, what do you got," said Bill, brightening. Usually he was the saddest looking Bigfoot hunter Henriette knew.

"You'll all hear Sunday morning, my friend," Max said, his blue eyes twinkling.

"You're bluffing," Lenny said.

"It's my find, and no one's getting a head start on me."

Robert automatically put an arm around Henriette as she joined the group. His blue sweater had a hole in the right elbow. She looked at Lenny's stained sweatshirt and Max's stubble.

"Max, you want to go for a little walk with me?" Lenny asked.

Max smiled. "You will not get a word from me. Not until Sunday." He turned his sharp eyes on Henriette and smiled. "Hello, Henriette."

"Hi, Max."

"How's Robert treating you?" His eyes slid down her neck to her bosom, waist, bare legs. She was glad it was almost dark.

"He prefers Bigfoot to me."

"The fool." The other hunters laughed.

"Stop flirting with my wife, Max," Robert said absently.

"Hey, who was that?" Lenny said, squinting into the darkness. A man hurried away, pulling a dog on a leash behind him.

"That was Kirby," Robert said. "With Cray's dog!"

"They were spying," said Spud, whom everyone liked despite his conviction that Bigfoot traveled in UFOs.

"They had to be," Lenny agreed. "I've never seen that dog on a leash. Cray just opens the door and gives the dog a kick and lets it roam. Hell, I'm surprised they managed to dig up a leash. Yup, they were definitely spying."

The other Bigfoot wives returned to the camp to pull their lawn chairs into a semicircle around the bonfire, facing the parking lot. It was nearly nine o'clock, almost time for the entertainment to start. The conversation paused when a car drove down the main road, but it passed without turning in the driveway.

They waited for Lola Dee.

"Just forget her," said Penny, Bill's wife. "Set up the show without her." Henriette didn't like to look at Penny. The bad perm and extra pounds were unfortunate enough, but the deep grooves between Penny's eyes testified to eighteen years of being progressively forsaken for Bigfoot.

"She'll be here," Robert said cheerfully. "She's a professional. Anyway, I told her sometime after eight-thirty would be fine."

"A professional slut," Penny muttered.

Robert, Lenny, and Bill's cover band, The Yetis, practiced all year to play at the Sasquatch Fest. This year, they'd invited local sexpot Lola Dee to emcee the weekend events, horrifying the wives. The men refused to reveal the amount of her compensation, but the wives suspected it was five hundred dollars. A couple of things Henriette had in common with Penny were they both had full-time jobs while their husbands worked part-time, and they wondered who was paying that five hundred dollars.

"So this is really big, eh, Max?" Lenny asked, his face boyish in the firelight. "Should we call in sick to work Monday?"

Max smiled. Henriette's gut clenched in dread. Here comes the end.

Just the night before, Max had spent the evening at Robert and Henriette's and told them exactly what he had. Henriette could see it in her mind like the film was rolling on her eyelids, the soundtrack a clock ticking time downwards to Sunday's explosion.

One week ago. Twenty miles north of Johnson. Max was investigating a rash of unpublicized sightings. She could see him walking along an old logging road,

overgrown with bushes now, safari hat on his head, snakeskin belt circling his waist, weighed down by two cameras and a biopsy tip dart gun. He scans the trees on both sides of the path for unidentifiable fur. He finds a clump of auburn fur six feet off the ground, caught in a tree that overhangs the path. He holds it between his fingers like something frail and precious, sniffs it, grimaces at the stench. His pulse quickens, eyes open wide. It has to be a Bigfoot! Head down, sharp blue eyes comb the trail for footprints. He finds a huge dropping, too big for a bear. He walks two steep miles uphill, sweating through his khaki shirt in the summer heat, until he comes to a set of tracks. Eighteen inches long, twice as wide as his own foot. These are the freshest Bigfoot tracks he's ever seen. He stands paralyzed, the only human for miles around on the side of the hot, buzzing summer mountain. A good scientist would take this evidence, not expecting more. A good scientist would take the plaster casting kit out of his backpack and make molds of these tracks. But Max is more adventurer than scientist, and these tracks are fresh! He only hesitates a few seconds, then he bounds up the mountain, running on tiptoe, careful not to step in the tracks. He'll cast them on the way down.

He follows the tracks to a small clearing, where he hides behind a tree and peers into a scene that almost stops his heart. In a bramble of blackberry bushes stand two sasquatches. The taller is seven feet high, its straight back and powerful carriage covered with auburn fur. Its companion is less than six feet high and brown. Both face away from him, going about their innocent business of the forest. A smaller sasquatch—perhaps three feet high—plays at their feet, thumping a stick against the ground.

Suddenly all the sightings he's investigated over the years flash before his eyes, waving and pulsating and coming to rest in these composites before him. Max, who was born steady and invulnerable, thinks he might faint.

The shoulders are wide, the necks barely existent. The buttocks are firm, the torsos massive. The creatures tear branches from the bush, ripping leaves and berries off as they pull the branches through their mouths, left to right.

Max holds his breath, terrified of discovery, wanting this moment to last for years. The smaller sasquatch turns, and Max sees its face. He stifles a cry. The face is undoubtedly more human than ape, with deep-set, intelligent eyes over a wide nose and mouth. Long auburn tresses sprout from the top of its head, cascading about its shoulders.

It sees Max.

The young sasquatch whimpers, a frail, high-pitched noise, and slowly the larger creatures turn, their torsos, necks, and heads moving together in one piece, just like in the Patterson film. The smaller adult has large, hanging breasts. The sasquatches look right into Max's eyes. There's no time to shoot them with a camera and the dart gun, so Max grabs the gun, which is already loaded with a small but vicious metal cylinder that can take a chunk out of any creature. He holds it up and shoots the big male in the buttock as it strides away. It cries out, traumatized, a creature too big to have any natural predators, a creature that has never experienced attack.

As the sasquatches thunder through the forest, the smallest, the child, turns again and shoots Max a look of incomprehension. Max has found what he's spent thirty-three years searching for, and now he's shot them and scared them away within one minute. He hears them groan and cry to each other as they crash through blackberry bushes, indifferent to the thorns, wanting nothing so much as to get away from Max, who has waited his life to be with them. Then they're gone entirely and he hears nothing but insects and birds and an occasional small rustling.

The tissue sample is at a lab. By Sunday, Max will have a preliminary report to share with his colleagues. He'll have to reveal the site if he wants the scientific community to take him seriously, which he does after thirty-three years. He'll reveal it to a discreet anthropologist or two, and a biologist, and they'll leak it out to a friend or colleague, and within a week the whole story will be in *People* magazine, and on the talk shows in ten days.

The new expeditions will be thorough. Helicopters with infrared tracking devices. Hundreds of Smithsonian affiliates. Maybe the National Guard; next year is an election year. Nets and cages and traps. Armored trucks and freight cars. Primate research labs and zoos.

The sasquatches will be kidnapped from their wooded homes, their dignity stolen. Two years from now the last few specimens will be dejected and glassy-eyed as any other zoo animal, staring out at concrete expanses marred by squished hot dogs and pieces of popcorn. Matted fur, shortened life span, lowered sperm count. Zookeepers will pack sasquatches in giant wooden crates and ship them to other zoos to mate with other dull-eyed, weak-brained, dirty, spiritless, caged sasquatches, all the while talking about how much they've done to save a precious endangered species.

The whole thing will be unbearable. Henriette will have to leave Robert.