The Deer in the Mirror
Holladay, Cary

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The Flood

I. High Water

Rapidan, Virginia
April 1886

Here came something big. Twelve-year-old Gid Ulsh, in the river boiling with flotsam, recognized the object as a hog trough. He leaned out from the boat he shared with his father. The little craft swayed dangerously in the cold water. The trough came close, then slipped out of reach. Gid’s father waved an arm, meaning, Let it go.

Gid’s head filled with the shouts of other salvagers. The swollen river, carrot-colored with the soil of pastures, poured over the mill dam. A rope was strung across the river and tied to trees on either side. Salvagers looped their own ropes around it to steady their boats in the current. The bridge’s wooden timbers were submerged, and the span connecting Orange County to Culpeper County was mere inches above the water. Gid saw Henry Fenton, owner of the riverside grain mill, direct men to close the bridge. Before they could do so, a man on horseback galloped up. Henry Fenton shook his head, but the man leaped from his horse, took off his shirt, and draped it over the horse’s head.
Everybody was watching now, those on land and those in boats. Gid gazed upward.

The man took the bridle and led the blindfolded animal across the bridge, double-quick. Gid held his breath. So close was the bridge to the water that it appeared the bridge floated and the horse swam. When man and horse reached the Culpeper County side, the salvagers cheered. The man waved, then took the blindfold off his horse, jumped on its back, and rode away.

Gid and his father turned their attention back to salvage. The flood brought all kinds of things into Rapidan, living and dead. Carcasses caught on the submerged wall of the mill slough, jerked loose, bobbed into the channel, and disappeared around the bend. Underwater objects jolted the Ulshes’ boat like whales. The danger was exciting, but the dead animals stopped Gid’s pleasure: cattle, dogs, sheep, and goats.

“See there,” said Gid’s father. “A rabbit hutch.”

They braced to try for it. Gid’s father snagged it with his pole and got their boat back to shore. They hauled the hutch onto land, their shoes sopping. Gid’s father stroked his earlobe, a gesture of satisfaction. The ear was notched, the result of a boyhood fight with his brother Bern, Gid’s uncle. Gid peered into the hutch and saw a ball of dirty fur.

“Look at that!” Gid’s father pointed at the river. A steamer trunk slid toward them, its lid askew in a crooked smile. “Stay here,” his father said and shoved off again.

“You got a bunny,” said a voice. An ancient woman called Sarah Nighten knelt beside Gid. She pulled the animal out and pressed Gid’s hand against its tiny chest. There was its heartbeat, faint and quick. Delighted, Gid gathered it into his arms.

His brain registered a noise distinct from the rush of the river—cries of alarm. He set the rabbit back in its hutch. Something bucked in the water: a boat, overturned. Behind it, twisting through the waves, a man’s arms tore at air. His father.

Gid hollered.

Two men went after his father, but their boat dumped them out, so there were three men slipping downriver faster than people could scream. The current took Gid’s father speedily around the curve and out of sight. Men threw ropes to the other two, and soon they lay heaving on the banks.

Gid fought his way toward Henry Fenton and begged, “Help my papa.”

Henry Fenton summoned three men to launch the biggest boat available. Gid felt the thrill of being helped by a powerful person. Henry Fenton directed an assistant to telegraph the miller at Raccoon Ford, five miles down-
river. Other men loaded a boat into a wagon. “Ride hell for leather to the Ford,” Henry Fenton said, and the men were off.

Sarah Nighten appeared, the hem of her dress sagging with mud. “This won’t turn out good,” she said to Gid. “When they find your daddy, don’t look at him.”

The phrase *hell for leather* gave Gid hope. He said, “They’ll save him.”

“You need to get home. Here, take t’other side of the hutch and we’ll put it in your wagon,” Sarah said, and they did.

“We have to get the boat,” Gid said.

“Don’t worry about the boat.” Sarah shook the reins, and the horse moved.

At the Ulshes’ cabin, people gathered, keeping watch with Gid and his mother throughout the chilly spring afternoon. Late in the day, word came that Chapman Ulsh had turned up at Raccoon Ford.

He was dead.

“No,” Gid said, and “No,” said his mother, Leonora Ulsh. She too believed in the powers of Henry Fenton and had expected her husband to return safely, maybe even go out and make another try for the steamer trunk, which witnesses had described to her.

At dusk, a man named Pete Grasty brought the corpse home in a wagon. Grasty called out, “I was robbed by nigras. They even robbed *him*. Took coins out of his pocket.”

Gid’s mother ran to the wagon, lifted the blanket, and gazed. She let the blanket fall, retreated to the porch, and said to the group, “He couldn’t swim.”

“Aw, Leenie,” women said as she wept. “And you with a baby on the way.”

Thus Gid learned he was to acquire a brother or sister. The news made him feel worse.

As the body was unloaded, it slipped out of its blanket, exposing a head with the familiar notched ear. Onlookers moaned. Gid reached the body just as Pete Grasty bundled the blanket around it. A hand fell out, and somebody on the porch guffawed. Gid placed the hand on his father’s bare chest. So cold, those fingers, and he was shocked that his father was naked. He hadn’t known the river would tear off clothes.

People kept coming, Gid’s father’s German kin: the Handiboes, Hufnagels, and Shellenbergers. They came from Lignum, Brandy Station, Mount Pony, Cedar Mountain, and Gourdvine Fork. They were farmers, tanners, and blacksmiths. Or miners: there was iron at Mine Run and gold at Vaucluse.
Out in the yard, tethered horses whinnied and pitched, churning the earth to muck.

Nobody came from Gid's mother's family. She was a Nalle, and on her mother's side a Graves, and those names carried weight. To Gid's recollection, he had never met his mother's parents. No Nalles or Graveses appeared, as if the death of Chapman Ulsh were unworthy of notice. "Oh, they know, all right," his mother cried in a ragged voice.

Gid smelled food that women were preparing, and the smoky odor of whiskey. People ate and drank in every room. When the dishes ran out, people ate from pots. Gid observed among his relatives the traits his father had condemned or championed: the Handiboes' pickley breath, the Hufnagels' hellfire stare, the Shellenbergers' speckled hands and incessant smoking.

Sarah Nighten brought Gid a prize, a roast chicken leg. He retreated to his bed to eat. It was dark. All the candles and lanterns were in the front room with the body. Cousins crowded into bed with Gid, and he soon lost the chicken leg. Other kinfolk pushed into the room and spread coats on the floor. Gid felt stifled and miserable.

The next day dawned cloudy but without rain. The grave took all morning to dig. Gid fell asleep in church; a cousin kicked his leg. When the funeral and burying were over, it was time to eat. Back at the house, the wagon driver talked about another death caused by the flood. A tree had crashed through a roof and impaled a woman in her bed.

"Who?" Gid's mother asked with tears on her cheeks.

"Old lady up the mine road," Pete Grasty said. "The tree went through her heart."

"Did you see the lady and the tree your own self?" demanded Gid's Uncle Bern.

"Naw, but . . ." Pete Grasty appealed to Gid's mother. "You believe me, Leenie?"

"Leave her alone, Pete Grasty," Uncle Bern said. "I think you're the one that robbed a dead man. You robbed my brother and his widow-woman," and he and Pete Grasty argued back and forth, did not, did so, until Uncle Bern leaped from his chair.

He raised his end of the table so plates, food, and cutlery slid off in a long, splattering clatter. Gid tasted cinnamon and blood as a dish of pear butter cut his lip. Mourners twisted away from the crash. Pete Grasty and Uncle Bern wrestled in the mess. Gid crouched and hid until the commotion was over. Eventually he fell asleep.

When he opened his eyes, evening sun shone through the window. He
crawled out from the slurry of food. Sarah Nighten heaved broken dishes into a barrel.

“Where is everybody?” Gid asked. “Where’s my mother?”
“Sleeping,” she said. “The others, they’re at the river.”
“Has the water gone down?”
“Down everywhere. Fenton’s got his mill running. They say you can see the rock at Raccoon Ford,” Sarah said.

If you could see that rock from either bank, you could safely cross the water. What good would that do, now that his father was dead? Gid remembered the fight. “Who won?”

“Your uncle did,” said Sarah. “Your mother will need looking after. Can you do that?”

“No,” said Gid. There was a theatrical element in his mother’s emotions that scared him.

People returned to the house, trumpeting about treasures pulled from the river. They ate leftover food, smacking their lips. By midnight Gid had had enough of snores and farts. He stood up on his bed and shouted, “Go home.” He dodged a swatting hand and said, “Go home!”
They kicked him off his bed, somebody’s foot on his fanny and somebody else’s in the small of his back. Toppling, he saw himself as a grown man: Go home, get out, to neighbors and callers and kin, everybody but his own woman and kids.

When the mourners finally departed, the only food left was sauerkraut and walnuts.

Sarah Nighten haunted the riverbanks. Gid heard the stories. If she found a boy tormenting a frog or throwing fish onto the ground instead of back into the water, she’d pounce. “Eat dirt,” she’d say until the boy did it.

“You don’t see her till she’s right on you,” boys said.

She caught one of the Jouette brothers killing a snake for the fun of it, and she yanked out a chunk of his hair. The boy, a friend of Gid’s, had a bald spot to prove it.

By then the flood was a couple weeks past. Gid’s mother wore a brooch she’d made with his father’s hair, a lock braided beneath a chip of glass. Already Pete Grasty was attempting to court her, never mind that she was pregnant, and so were other men, bringing cream and strawberries. She didn’t let them stay to eat with her.

“I was meant for better,” she declared, her eyes dark as watermelon seeds. She was Leonora Nalle, she reminded Gid, before she was ever Leenie Ulsh.
“We’re going home,” she said. “To my parents. Don’t bother to pack anything.”

Gid did get the rabbit hutch, and his mother drove the wagon hell for leather some miles away from their cabin, which after all the Ulshes did not own. They rented it from Henry Fenton.

Gid’s mother pulled up to a splendid house and parked in the yard. “My mother will take care of us,” she said.

Gid followed her. The columns of the porch were as thick as tree trunks, and the steps were so high they hurt his legs.

“Take off that ugly thing,” was the first thing Gid’s grandmother said, pointing at the hair brooch. Gid’s mother unclipped it as if it were some small living horror that had dropped from the sky. She tossed the brooch onto a hallway table. Mrs. Nalle told a servant to bring tea.

The next thing she said was to Gid himself, in tones like a curse: “You look like him.” The old lady’s disapproval made Gid proud of the yellow hair and green eyes he’d inherited from his father, and a mouth so wide it cracked his face in two. He hoarded the practical knowledge his father had passed on: if you hear fire, grab a bucket and run to help. If your tooth hurts, crush a ladybug between your fingers and put the powder on the gum. He thought of those things while his grandmother glared.

“You saw Gid when he was a baby, Mother,” Gid’s mother protested faintly. “All babies look alike,” Mrs. Nalle said. Her hand was cold when it touched his, and the tea tasted bitter. He was glad there was food. “Frozen sultana pudding with claret sauce,” his grandmother said, placing tiny portions onto plates.

It was delicious. Gid was hungry.

The Nalles’ house sat so high that the cabin Gid and his parents had occupied was not even a speck in the valley below. He imagined his mother’s suitor pushing open the cabin door to find her gone. Courtship of a Nalle was not for such folk as Pete Grasty. It was for Greens or Slaughters, for Pendletons and Swans. In time, those men came to the Nalles’ house, sweeping their hats from their heads and talking with Leonora’s tall, unsmiling father. The suitors waited endlessly while Leonora sat at her dressing table. Gid, seeing despair on a caller’s face, would trot up to his mother’s room to remind her about her visitor. “We’ve got to get you in school,” she would say.

He learned not to disturb her. She slept so deeply in her own giant bed in her own huge room that when he jostled her arm, she didn’t wake up. On restless nights, he went downstairs, past the brooch forgotten on the hallway table where she had flung it. He went outside, lifted his rabbit from the hutch, and hugged it. It had come from the river. It had survived.
“Papa saved you,” Gid whispered, and the rabbit clutched his neck as if it knew.

Gid was sleepy during the day. “Lazy,” Grandmother Nalle said. He knew what she saw when she looked at him: his father’s notched ear at the top of a ladder. She was the one who had found the window open and Leonora’s bed empty, the breeze of elopement stinging her face. Gid studied a family tree that hung in a hallway. His mother’s name appeared on a twig. Beside it was the letter m and his father’s name, and a word freshly inked: Chapman Ulsh (drowned).

Leonora’s belly swelled. She nibbled chicken from trays. Gid asked if he could pull the wishbone with her.

“Oh, yes!” She snapped the wishbone hard, as if there was something she really wanted.

Gid decided he was glad about getting a brother or sister. But events moved faster than the river in flood. Leonora died in childbirth, and the baby died too. Grandmother Nalle flew into a lasting rage which focused on Gid. He found himself ejected from his grandparents’ house. He went out to get his rabbit, but its cage was padlocked. Behind him, Grandmother Nalle said, “It’s mine now.”

“I hate you,” Gid said, and the old lady tightened her mouth, almost smiling.

Farmed out to his Ulsh kin, who were kind but overtaxed, Gid felt himself a burden, always underfoot. He wanted to live with his Uncle Bern, but he had moved to Kentucky.

In the spring of 1887, Gid ran away from the Ulsh relatives, back to the cabin where he’d lived with his parents. Luckily, Henry Fenton had not rented it out. Gid was still a child, scrounging and starving in the empty house. No corn in the crib, no potatoes in the barrel. The kitchen garden was slick with weeds and humpy with rodent burrows. No furniture. Everything was stolen.

He went to the river and fished. His father’s screams were still in the water.

Sarah Nighten saw him, came home with him, and stayed.

She knew all the rivers, hills, and roads. She drew maps in the dirt with sticks: here’s where the Rapidan River meets the Rappahannock. Here’s the way to Orange, Stevensburg, Verdiersville. She talked about an old pole road that ran from Devil’s Jump to Ebenezer Church, how she’d been married in the middle of that road long ago with friends and neighbors gathered round. She was fourteen, she said. “He was a soldier.”

Gid asked, “Did he fight in the war? Did he die?”
“Probably dead by now. Wasn’t the war with the Yankees. It was before that. He came back and went away again, and I never saw him no more.”

“Why did he leave?”

“People just go,” she said. “I tried to keep him. Caught hold of his shirt, and it stretched out in my hand like taffy.”

They lived on fish and wild greens. Summer came, and the river shrank to a trickle. Gid explored the mud and found a buggy wheel and a broken plow, likely remnants of the Great Flood. He excavated a battered trunk. Could it be the one that lured his father to his death? He lifted the crabbed lid and found stiff rags of clothing, but also a pair of shoes, squashed but whole. They fit. Excited, he dragged the trunk home. Sarah cleaned it up, and they used it to store their few possessions. In Gid’s mind, it was a present from his father.

Henry Fenton showed up with a sack of clothing. He didn’t say anything about rent, only, “My wife sends you these things. We’ve got boys your age.”

Eagerly Gid pulled out good shirts and pants. There was a dress for Sarah.

“Thank you,” he said.

Henry Fenton said, “Would you like to work at the mill? I need an errand boy.”

Soon Gid went about on a mule provided by Henry Fenton. Thanks to Sarah Nighten, Gid knew every road. The geography in his head never failed him.

High on the wall of the mill office was a dark line. Henry Fenton would point it out to customers, saying, “The water was all the way up to here.” Silence always followed, and a low whistle or two, as farmers clutched hats to chests, remembering.

“Who was the man that blindfolded his horse to go across the bridge?” Gid asked.

Henry Fenton said, “I’ve never known. Never saw him before or since.”

People were forgetting Gid’s history. Some thought Sarah Nighten was his grandmother. Men at the mill and boys he fished with: Gid found that his origins remained crystal clear in the minds of some, but others forgot, as if by growing up, he had erased the child he was.

Out in the mill yard, he heard the workers’ wives talking about a man who died in the flood. The women brought the noon meal to their husbands. Men and women sat apart on the banks, men eating silently, women chatting.

“Name was Ulsh. Chapman Ulsh. His wife came from a rich family,” a woman said. “He married a Nalle, but I don’t remember her first name.”

“Leonora,” Gid said, but not so loud they could hear him. His mother was
lost to him as soon as she took off the brooch. Unclipped that pin, unplugged her very heart.

Sarah Nighten was going blind, she announced, her vision disappearing in chunks. She drew a diagram for Gid in the dirt, separating into quadrants what she could see and what she couldn’t. “It’s something I caught in the woods,” she said.

“I’ll get a doctor for you,” Gid offered.

“No. This don’t get better.”

Fall came, and Henry Fenton said Gid had to go to school. He could work at the mill on Saturdays. So there Gid was, back in the schoolhouse he’d attended years earlier, with boys and girls ages six to fifteen shifting about on benches. Gid’s legs were newly long.

“Write a story,” the teacher said.

A girl named Lottie Hawley sat beside him. She was only seven, but she could read and write better than anybody else. Though not pretty, having a deformity in one leg that caused a limp, she had a powerful presence. The teacher asked her to read her story aloud. It ended with, “Time went by, and everything changed.”

Gid asked Lottie in a whisper, “What’s your favorite thing to do?”

“Ride my horse,” she said, “to get away from my parents. I don’t like them.”

“Hush, Gid,” the teacher scolded. The teacher wouldn’t fuss at Lottie, Gid knew, because her father was a rich man, having built up a hardware store into a big business.

That was Gid’s childhood. It went by that quick, a story he could sum up in his head. People in Orange and Culpeper counties, those who hadn’t forgotten, knew the parts of his life that had played out in public. Orphan boy. Did real well. Now he’s Vice-President of the Bank of Culpeper.

II. Race Day

July 1908

A kid reporter from the Culpeper Exponent is covering the Merchants Association meeting. The story is his brainstorm: Secrets of Success. “And your secret, Mr. Ulsh?” he asks.
“I like to work.” Gideon Ulsh, banker, attends Merchants Association meetings with the likes of Charlie Yowell, A. J. Eggborn, Barry Burgandine, and Orville Waugh, men whose ancestors’ names made up the muster rolls of wars with the British, the Indians, and the Yankees. Meetings are held in the dining room of the Waverly Hotel, beneath the banner of the Culpeper Minute Men with its rattlesnake emblem. The meals are important to Gid, a bachelor. He ought to hire a cook, but he’s too busy.

A. J. Eggborn, who made his fortune in steam laundries, tells the reporter, “Gid goes out to visit his customers. I don’t know any other banker who does that. People like it. You’ll see him on the road more than at his bank. Or hanging around at the river. That’s his hobby.”

The reporter is scrawling, flipping through the pages of his notebook. Gid feels embarrassed that his friends have seen him often enough at the river to joke about it. Sometimes he fishes. The water’s sound and movement seem to comment on his father’s life and abrupt death. To Gid, the river represents all that’s lost or unfinished. It holds the stories of so many people, back to Indian times and before. Odors of sand, clay, foam, fish, salamanders, and turtles change with the seasons, and he’s learned two dozen birdsongs.

“Have you seen the new water fountain at the bank?” Barry Burgandine asks the reporter. “The old pump’s just for emergencies now. Or baths, if Gid could get a secretary to join him.”

Grinning, Gid ducks his head. A waiter brings a platter of baked chicken and rice.

Charlie Yowell, the youngest and wildest member of the Merchants Association, says, “Put this in the paper—Gid’s looking for a wife.”

“Nobody’ll have him,” says A. J. Eggborn, “so he has to advertise.”

Earnestly the reporter says, “Behind every successful man . . .”

Orville Waugh interrupts. “Is a woman who pushes him out the door every morning. Lord, don’t I know it.”

“Just so my woman don’t push me out of bed,” barks Doc Minor, who is deaf only when he wants to be.

The men eat. It’s Gid the reporter wants to talk to. “Mr. Ulsh, did you have somebody in particular who helped you develop your business philosophy?”

Henry Fenton is eighty years old, spending his days in a rocking chair while his son Richard, whose clothes Gid wore as a boy, runs the mill. “Henry Fenton,” Gid says. “He hired me as a messenger boy. He knew how to treat his customers. I learned all I could from him.”

“Thank you, sir,” the reporter says. He folds his notebook and departs.

Gid thinks he should have given credit to Sarah Nighten too. He turns to
Doc Minor. “Tell me something. What kind of an illness makes a person go blind bit by bit?”

Doc sips his iced tea. “That’s a bad thing. People get it in river valleys, from the soil and from birds. Hunters, for instance. Who are we talking about?”

“Sarah Nighten.”

Doc nods. “Old and gone.”

Gid checks his watch as if he’s late for a meeting. He isn’t. He just gets the urge to be alone, and when the feeling comes over him, he can’t get away fast enough. It’s how he felt as a child the night his father died, surrounded by people making their maddening claims on space and time. He has departed from parties without explanation, raising his hat to a host or hostess who believes he’s been called away On Business, and it’s only to go home to his brick house on South East Street or to ride down to Rapidan, stand on the bridge, and watch the river flow.

“If you got to be somewhere, Gid, go ahead,” says Doc. “That eye disease, now. It’s one of those long, funny words.” Doc taps his head. “It’ll come to me.”

Gid stands up from the table and hurries into the warm dusk. The hotel’s screen door slaps behind him. The relief of stepping outside is enormous. A few people stroll by, but nobody tries to detain Banker Ulsh. In tall trees, cicadas tune up, and this too is a relief, for nobody can hold a conversation in all this racket.

One person catches his eye for the fact of her stillness: Lottie Hawley, all grown up, sitting in a wagon in front of the depot. Her father still owns a prosperous hardware store. The wagon is painted with an advertisement for one of the store’s big sellers—DeLaval Cream Separator and Milker. Lottie’s horse twitches its ears at flies.

Lottie is said to be a little touched. She tends to fall asleep in public, to park the emblazoned vehicle and snooze. Might she understand Gid's urge to escape from people? DeLaval Cream Sep he reads. Sooner or later you will get . . . DeLaval Cream Separator and Milker. Lottie appears to take no notice of the Negroes who gather at the depot to box with each other until the station master or sheriff breaks up the matches, at which point they’ll squat on their haunches and twirl wooden tops until the official goes away. You might blink and see black men idle, and blink again, and they’re all sweat and ambition.

Between Lottie and the Negroes, Gid can’t make a false move.

Can’t they tell he’s still the boy who saw his father swept away? Whenever he goes to Raccoon Ford, calling on customers on the steep bluffs above the river, he’ll think, This is where they found him. Kingfishers dive, their
blue wings catching light. Just yesterday, a dog trotted up the bluff and into a house where Gid sat with an old man, working out the terms of a loan. The dog pressed her head against Gid’s knee.

The old man said, “I drownded the puppies this morning. She keeps looking for ’em.”

“Don’t do that,” Gid said. He swept the papers together and stood up.

The man said, “I can’t have fifty dogs round here, Mr. Ulsh. Do I still get the money?”

Gid waited while the man scrawled his name. It seemed to take a long time.

Banker Ulsh is only Gid after all. This welling in his heart these days he doesn’t understand, the way the world is brighter and louder and nearer than it’s ever been, and all he can do is make his quick, polished exits. He hopes nobody sees.

But Lottie sees. A horse in a fly mask might look to be dozing, but it’s alert to everything around it. She’s parked among the colored men and their women, yardbirds and picnickers. Red Culpeper County dust rises around them, rich red soil for growing corn and wheat and hay, but you got to rotate it, farmers remind each other.

As a twelve-year-old, Lottie portrayed a Redcoat in a play about the American Revolution. She had one line, dismissing the patriots as “Fahmahs with bitchforks!” She, a girl, played a man’s role, her accent so hilarious that even now, men and women her age murmur the line beneath their breath. She tossed her head when she said it. Her mother had made her a wig of rolled sheep’s wool dusted with powder.

Gid at eighteen had never laughed so hard in his life.

Now Lottie stirs and speaks. “Hey, Gid. Take me to the races tomorrow.”

It’s the most she has said to him since childhood. She is regarded as an old maid, a figure of fun, protected only by her daddy’s wealth. She is twenty-eight, and he is thirty-four.

“Just get me there, all right?” she says. “You can leave anytime you want.” She lifts the reins and slaps them down.

The name of Sarah Nighten’s sight-robbing disease comes back to Doc Minor as the horses thunder round the bend, Lottie Hawley’s pick in the lead. Doc cups his hands and bellows into Gid’s ear, “Histo. Histoplasmosis.” He tips his hat to Lottie, who clutches Gid’s arm.

Horses pound into the home stretch. Bettors are shouting.
The Flood

The long shot, a three-year-old Arabian named Bubble-U, heads for the hole. People leap to their feet and scream so loud even deaf old Doc covers his ears. Beside Gid, Lottie’s suntanned face beneath a parasol is orange as a tiger lily, one eye on him and the other on Bubble-U, a skewbald creature she’d proclaimed a champ when he was born.

She throws her parasol aside, runs to the winner’s circle, and throws her arms around Bubble-U’s neck. She’s picked horses all her life, but people have said it’s luck. This changes everything. This is the race that makes her reputation. The jockey knows who this is, the Hawley woman jumping up and down. He’s glad he’s high enough up that she can’t kiss him, for she ain’t real pretty.

III. Gizzards and Wings

Gid loans money to everybody—the Negro boxers and top-spinners, and turkey farmers who drive their flocks into town so the intersection of Main and Davis Streets is a snowfall of feathers. He loans money to rich folks so they can do more of their high and mighty things, though they don’t go so far as to let Gid Ulsh marry their daughters.

Old Hawley might.

Over ham, butterbeans, and ice cream, the members of the Merchants Association talk man to man. “She was a virgin when we got started, and now she needs it twice a day,” says A.J. Eggborn. The pharmacist Milton Heflin, whose name reminds Gid of a sneeze, hints at having his assistant, a Miss Suddith, up against the shelves with pills and vials clattering down. “Can’t imagine doing it now without something falling on my head,” Milton Heflin says as men whoop.

Lottie Hawley, though: they don’t tease each other about her. Sometimes her father, Mac Hawley, attends a meeting, nodding, “How do.” He keeps two coffee cups full so he doesn’t have to wait for a fresh cup.

Suddenly Gid bumps into Lottie everywhere.

“How do you know so much about horses?” he asks.

“I’ve been watching them all my life,” she says, “just like I watch people.”

She knows how long a lame leg should be wrapped. Recommends adding beet pulp to the feed of those that are old or tired. When Doc Minor’s mare develops founder, she suggests tincture ofaconite. The horse recovers. Milton Heflin’s Percheron lies in a stupid state as if dead. “It’s megrims,” Lottie says. “Try opium,” and the animal lives.
Gid gives her a desk at the bank. People seek her advice about swaps and sales. Most days she’s out at stables and pastures. Lottie Hawley, driving her wagon with the flaking paint, *DeLaval Cream Separator and Milker*, possesses some wizardry that amazes Culpeper County during the hot summer and long warm fall of 1908. Gid invests in a new buggy and a boy to drive her around. People praise her to Gid, asking how he knew. He takes the credit. He’s been in business long enough to know that when you can, you oughta.

The man whose hair Sarah Nighten long ago jerked out in a clump, Davy Jouette, has a colt for sale. Jouette is a grown man with children of his own. Gid visits Jouette’s farm with Lottie and Doc Minor, who wants to buy the colt, but only on Lottie’s say-so.

“Is he all right?” Doc Minor asks Lottie.

It’s hot for October. Jouette’s wife gave them lemonade back at the house. Yellowjackets buzz and scramble over a nest in a fence post. Gid worries they’ll swarm up in his face, drawn by the lemonade on his lips. Buzzards circle in the hard white sky. A line of arbor vitae grows beside the fence, the soft, fringed foliage offering hot shade and smelling of sap. The pale sky bears down on them, men and woman and horses. Lottie’s hat shadows her face, and there is something sad about her mouth, Gid thinks, as if she has waked from some unhappy dream.

“Well?” Doc is asking Lottie. The men wait.

“He’s more than all right,” Lottie says of the colt, and money changes hands.

Gid and Lottie ride out into the woods along the Rapidan River. She has promised to show him quicksand. “There,” she says, pointing to a dappled place under trees. “Don’t go any closer, or you might not get out.”

Gid sees only a wallow, as if animals have lain there. He hears the river and the glistening sound of insects. They’re on Nalle land. His grandmother, the rabbit-thief, died and left her vast property to distant relatives. She willed him one dollar. He tells himself it doesn’t matter. He’s self-made, almost a rich man.

Lottie says, “We could use the saddle blankets.”

She climbs down from her horse, and after a moment, so does he. He hasn’t been with many women, though he had more feeling for them (a girl in Verdiersville; a young widow in Madison Mills) than for Lottie. Generally he
lies in his bed too tired for loneliness except on hot nights when he remem-
bers he’s still young.

They spread out the blankets. Shadows are dark as burns on the ground. High above them in a cottonwood tree, birds stutter.


Their activities are rapid and athletic. Afterward Lottie laughs. “You know what my mother’s always saying? I grew up hearing don’t. Don’t do that. Plenty who will.” She clasps Gid’s hand and raises it against slanting sunlight. “I used to hate my mother.”

“You can’t mean that,” he says, the ground cold as snow beneath him.

She rises on her elbow, still naked, her small breasts showing blue veins. “Oh, the people I’ve hated—when they’ve died, it hasn’t made any difference. I’ve lived long enough to know that.” She draws a pine needle through her lips. “The good part of my life is animals. My life’s a history of animals.”

“It’s late,” he says. “We should go.”

“Do you think about dying?” she says. “Your father—I remember that. And you saw it.”

Gid sits up, shaken. He doesn’t want to talk about his father with her.

She says, “When I die, that’ll be my time, all my own. Give me a hand,” and he helps her up.

He wishes they hadn’t. It’s a relief when a drummer starts paying attention to her. The man supplies her father with a product that speeds chickens’ molting process. Get your hens back to laying . . . fast!

At the Merchants Association Christmas luncheon, men hail Gid with an air of constraint, offering congratulations.

“What do you mean?” Gid asks.

“Your engagement,” says Charlie Yowell. “You and Miss Hawley.”

Seated beside Gid, Doc Minor slides something onto the table—a card addressed to Doc and his wife. Gid opens it and reads, Merry Christmas from Lottie Hawley and Gid Ulsh.

The fried trout in Gid’s throat sticks there. He sets his fork down and pushes back his chair. “Excuse me,” he says, and Doc nods.

At the bank, Lottie is at her desk conferring with a man and a woman. Gid interrupts them to tell her, “I need to talk to you.”

She follows him into his office. He closes the door. “Those cards you sent.” Lottie smiles, and the smile makes him madder.

“Why did you do that?” he asks. “People think we’re getting married.”
“Are you going to fire me?”
His thoughts haven’t gone that far.
“You won’t have to,” she says. “I’m going away for a while, to have an operation.”
He sits down in his chair. “Are you . . . is it a baby?”
“My leg,” she says. It’s been a long time since he noticed her limp. “I’m going to Richmond to have it done.”
Through the glass of his office, he sees the people at her desk check their watches.
“Will it help you walk better?” Gid asks.
“The doctor says so. I just want to look nicer.”
Gid’s fury is gone, exhaustion in its place.
Lottie says, “Don’t you want anything, Gid?”
They face each other, and it seems to Gid that customers and employees sense combat, freeze where they stand, and fix their eyes on him and Lottie. No coins jingle, no bills ruffle, the telephones go silent; the clock stops; the red bows along the tellers’ windows turn gray.
“I wanted a hog trough one time,” he says, “in the river.”
“Go to hell, Gid.” Lottie returns to her desk. Slowly the bank resumes activity. Lottie bends her head over papers, then glances up at him. Gid looks away.

The New Year begins without word from her. Customers who make inquiries at the bank are told to leave word for her.
“When is she coming back?” asks Gid’s secretary, Mrs. Black. “Do you know?”
“No,” he says. “I don’t.”
In February, Gid visits Mac Hawley at the hardware store.
“She stayed with friends in Richmond,” Hawley says, “but they told me she left after the operation. I went down there and found the doctor. Lottie came through just fine, he said.”
“Did she go with that fellow?” Gid asks, meaning the salesman, though he has seen the man in town since Lottie left.
“He says he don’t know where she is,” Hawley says. “My wife’s about out of her mind.”
Dread curls deep in Gid’s body. It’s the way he felt when his father was brought home under a blanket.
Police confront him. “What about this?” asks a detective, holding up a familiar Christmas card. “Did you have relations with her?”
“One time,” Gid answers. This would be funny if it was a story somebody else was telling, say at the Waverly Hotel.

*Hardware Heiress Disappears.* People speculate: she must have met with some accident or evil. Might be dead. Maybe she’s got amnesia and is lost in some strange city.

A colored woman who sells fried chicken at the depot insists she saw Lottie only recently. She tells a reporter, “She wanted wings and gizzards.”

Lottie’s mother tells the papers Lottie never ate a gizzard in her life.

“Only drumsticks,” Mrs. Hawley insists. “I miss my little girl.” When Lottie was a child, her mother says, her hair was so bright that butterflies clustered around her.

Yet in Gid’s recollections and in the newspaper photos, Lottie’s hair is black as coal.

Gid believes the fried chicken seller. He seeks her out at the depot. “I been knowing Miss Lottie all my life,” the woman says. “She took the Charlottesville train.”

Gid buys a ticket on the next train. He searches Charlottesville, but he doesn’t find her.

*To the Culpeper Exponent, Box 12*

*I seen your letter in the paper, the woman you describe as L. Hawley is here in Richmond, she lives on Church Hill. Send the reward and I will tell you more.*

*A lady frequents the race track in Charles Town, often winning considerable sums. She walks without difficulty, so if indeed she had surgery, the operation must have been successful.*

*Is the lady your sweet heart? Maybe your romance was not meant to be. I was engaged and then he left, I have had no word for two years. Maybe he ran off with your Miss Hawley (ha ha). I have brown hair and green eyes. I would be happy to have a letter from you.*

*If Miss Hawley is no longer in this world, you may yet contact her by the use of Spiri-
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Women who strike out on their own deserve what they get. My advice to you is renounce the whore and find a decent woman who has accepted Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior. A woman like L. Hawley will never forsake the sins of the flesh and the pleasures of sucking cock and fucking.

I met Miss Hawley at Orkney Springs, where she was taking the healing waters. She recovered enough to participate in bowling and billiards. She mentioned a Christmas card incident that she seemed to regret. A good sport and not a person to be taken lightly.

Gid travels to Orkney Springs and shows pictures of Lottie to the staff and guests of the inn. Nobody remembers her, nor does the proprietor recognize her name. The typewritten letter is unsigned. Gid concludes that this, the most promising lead, was a prank played by somebody who happened to know about the Christmas cards. Could Lottie have sent the letter herself? He lies awake trying to figure it all out.

In Charles Town, West Virginia, he visits the race track and shows her picture to patrons and employees. No Lottie.

In Richmond, he goes to her friends’ house, but they have nothing new to tell him. He walks the neighborhoods of Church Hill, knocks on doors, and shows the photographs, but people shake their heads. He rests on the hilltop, which is green with summer, and looks down at the James River. A scent of arbor vitae reaches him, and he recalls how sad Lottie looked that day at the Jouette farm. He has believed he understood sorrow, but perhaps he doesn’t. It isn’t love he feels, but if he ever finds her, he’ll ask her to marry him.

Her remarks about his father’s drowning come back to him. Why hasn’t he thought of that before? Was she planning suicide, telling him? Horror rushes through him.

Back in Culpeper, he waits. He can feel it coming.

Late one fall day, after heavy rains, a fisherman finds a body in the Rapidan River. The news rips through town. Gid calls the sheriff’s office and finds out
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where to go. He keeps his horse to a walk until he’s out of town, then heads for Blackjack Road at a gallop.

When he finds the spot, he pulls up and tries to catch his breath. Men are loading a wrapped bundle into a wagon. To Gid’s relief, Doc Minor, who is county coroner, is here too. A small crowd clusters nearby. Somebody says, “She was crazy, that’s what I heard.”

“Just bones and one boot, Gid,” the sheriff says quietly. He points to a scraggly bend. “It was over there. A partial skeleton, caught in those briars.”

Lottie always wore riding boots. Gid goes to Doc Minor and says, “It’s Lottie, isn’t it?”

Doc wipes sweat off his forehead. “Can’t tell yet. I’ll look it over at the morgue.”

Gid’s hands shake. He wants to examine the body, but he’s afraid of what he would see. He feels sure he would know if it’s Lottie, even if it’s only her bones.

He stays until the wagon pulls away.

That evening, Doc stops by Gid’s house. He says, “It’s a female, but smaller and younger. Lottie’s ma didn’t recognize the boot.”

Gid says, “She’d had leg surgery. Does that show up?”

“There’s only one leg, not her lame one. But this woman’s teeth are crowded. Lottie had real even teeth. Her ma showed me a picture.”

Gid can remember her slow, knowing smile but not her teeth. “So it isn’t?”

Doc shakes his head.

“Are you holding back, Doc?”

“You know me better than that.” Doc goes to Gid’s cabinet and pulls out the whiskey bottle. “Animals chewed the skin off, and the water and weather . . . oh, soon enough, we’re all dust. Those bones were out there a long time, probably longer than she’s been gone.” He pours a drink. “All the same, Lottie’s ma screamed and cried. Mac had to carry her out.” He knocks the whiskey back. “Others’ll turn up, from time to time. One of them might be her.”

The following year, Lottie’s mother dies, and the mystery briefly revives. Plainclothes police attend the funeral. Gid feels their knobby stares on his back. It’s late summer, hot even in the shade of the cemetery’s oaks. Old Mac Hawley weeps hard as a child, covering his face with his hands. Three years later, he too is dead.

A nephew named Ayers Hawley comes from Baltimore to take over the hardware store. He expands it and joins the Merchants Association. Gid dis-
likes him. Ayers Hawley hogs the conversation and criticizes the food at the Waverly Hotel.

Culpeper flourishes. An opera house is constructed, and a modern fire engine replaces the horse-drawn wagon. Talk at the Waverly Hotel is all about automobiles. Gid buys an Overland and teaches himself how to drive.

Five years after Mac Hawley’s death, in the autumn of 1918, a court declares Lottie Hawley dead. Ayers Hawley lays claim to the estate and wins. Mrs. Black, Gid’s secretary, circles the announcement and leaves the newspaper on his desk. Nobody remarks on it. People have other matters on their minds—war in Europe and Spanish flu at home. The ancient President of the Bank of Culpeper retires, and Gid ascends to that lofty post. He hires a commodities broker out of Washington, D.C. and assigns him to Lottie’s desk, which has stood unused all these years.

Sarah Nighten vanished too, yet he imagines she lay down in the woods, wanting her bones covered by leaves. The sheer passage of time suggests Sarah couldn’t possibly be alive. But Lottie could be. Gid can’t shake the feeling that he is responsible. He keeps hoping he’ll see her when he crosses a street or looks into a crowd. She wouldn’t recognize her wagon now. Ayers Hawley painted it yellow. It holds pots of flowers outside the hardware store that ought to belong to her.

IV. Bucket Brigade

A fire breaks out one night in November 1918. Waked by shouting, Gid jumps out of bed. Flames shimmer in the western sky above the business district. Ant-like figures rush about. Church bells ring and gong. He pulls on clothes and hurries downstairs. His father’s voice comes back to him: “Take a bucket,” and he grabs a pail.

Outside he finds he has joined a parade. Men, women, and children fill the streets in day dress and night clothes. They’re rushing toward the fire. Why not run away?
   It’s irresistible.

A horn blares, and a man yells, “Make way!” A fire truck barrels down the street, dogs barking and plunging alongside. Gid remembers the regular driver is down with flu and wonders who is at the wheel.

Wafers of ash waft through the hot wind. The voice of the fire rises over all the human sounds. Gid finds himself braced against a warm brick wall. The crowd flashes by like a merry-go-round. An old woman shuffles with hands held out before her. Is she blind, feeling her way toward the heat? Children
The Flood

stagger past. A woman darts after a toddler, her blouse open, a breast visible. A man lunges after them, and they go off together.

Gid reaches the downtown district. The opera house and Hawley’s Hardware are engulfed. Firemen train their hoses upon the inferno. Gid’s bank is next. The sky is a tunnel of dark blue light. The air grows cold, as if it’s sucking frost from the mountains. Explosions pierce the din. A rat clatters down a gutter spout, and its shining eyes find Gid’s. A dog pounces from the shadows. Growl and squeal, and both creatures vanish.

Gid draws a breath and finds he knows exactly what to do.

He hollers to citizens near him, “Form a line!” He holds his bucket high and locates the pump in the side yard of the bank. A boy follows his lead, and others join in until the line is two dozen, three dozen, fifty people strong. Buckets pile up beside the pump as fast as Gid can fill them. He passes them to willing, open hands, and a boy runs the empties back to him. Gid pumps and fills, pumps and fills, until his back and shoulders ache. If he has to, he’ll empty the well.

The boy cries, “It’s raining!”

Gid lifts his face to the sky. Rain splashes into his eyes, and a torrent breaks loose, soaking the buildings and putting out the fire. The bank is safe. Its walls are only charred, though nearby buildings are unrecognizable. Embers crust and flare, and piles of debris crumble and crash.

Relief pours through Gid. He wishes he had a wife at home. They would eat breakfast and go back to bed. He thinks *Lottie*, but someone else springs to mind: Mrs. Black, his secretary, a widow. Her kind face hovers in his brain, a welcome surprise. Why, he might court her. Someday he could tell her how the fire led him to thoughts of her.

Firemen coil their heavy hoses and stack them on the truck. Children run about and scatter. A photographer aims a camera, shielding it from the rain with a piece of canvas. This was not a Great Fire, but people will talk about it for a long time. Gid’s helpers disperse, except for the boy who first heeded his call. Tiredly they lean against the pump. Gid coughs, the wet smoke like wool in his lungs.

Beside him the boy says, “I never been so glad to see it rain.”

Gid wants to commend the child to his parents. He could hire him to run errands. Yes, he’ll do that. “Whose boy are you?”

As the boy opens his mouth, the fire truck starts its engine, reverses, and bumps across the yard. Gathering speed, it rushes toward them. Gid has an instant to realize it’s out of control. He pushes the boy out of the way. The truck overtakes Gid, mowing him down, knocking him out of his shoes. Wheels run over his shoulders, and a buzzing blackness pulls him in.
Is this how his father felt, wet and broken? Gid’s in the river, borne along.
Is that his father beside him? A notched ear rides by. Gid reaches out, but his
father veers away, and fish slither between them. Gid thrashes his way out
and gasps in the rain. He’ll get his breath, dive down, and find his father. Yet
his hands strike grass. Bewildered, he tries to crawl.

Shouts, clamor, hullabaloo. Men rush toward him, crying, “Banker Ulsh!”

For the first time in his life, he is glad to be surrounded. Men lift him up,
and he’s flying. The fire truck doesn’t stop until it crashes into a tree, and
the driver tumbles out, slipping in mud, cussing. Gid wants to laugh, but his
cracked body hurts too much.

He hopes his death is years away, but suddenly it matters that people
come to his funeral. Will they? From Lignum and Brandy Station, Rapidan
and Jeffersonton, Oak Shade and Monumental Mills, from Vaucluse and True
Blue, from Wolf Town and White Shop. He wants the Fentons to be there, and
the Eggborns and Burgandines, Minors and Hufnagels, the Jouettes, Pendle-
tons, Yowells, and Greens, the Nightens and Hawleys, if any remain, and any
Ulsh kin who might wish to claim him as theirs.